



Fig. 7. Southeastern corner of the platform of a possible mosque preserved in the extramural area just east of the *küllîye* complex.

Early Modern Jewish Histories In Ottoman and Mediterranean Contexts

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The blending of mythic and historical time is arguably the central characteristic of Jewish historical writing—the thing that most makes it “Jewish.” Perhaps, it is the Jewish view of history that makes Judaism what *it* is: a profoundly historical worldview, whose adherents believe “even God is known only insofar as he reveals himself ‘historically,’” in history.¹ This emphasis on historicism, made most famously by the late Yosef Hayyim Yerushalmi, has long been considered quintessentially Jewish. Yet during the early modern period, the melding of historical with eschatological and mythic time is characteristic of a wide swath of Mediterranean writing, from Orthodox Christian, Catholic, Muslim, and Jewish writers alike. An examination of some of the principal Jewish histories of the period gives a sense of the extent to which Jewish authors were vitally interested in the meaning of Ottoman history. Consideration of the broader context shows this interest to be one shared by the four central confessions of the early modern Mediterranean. We see, then, that such Jewish histories are as much Mediterranean and early modern as they are Jewish—and that the rise of the Ottomans was as carefully documented by Jewish writers as by any other group. The point of intersection provided by the Mediterranean was as much intellectual as it was anything else.

Jewish historical writing saw an efflorescence in the Mediterranean as the Ottoman Empire expanded across the sea's four shores. The eyewitnesses to Ottoman expansion—including the Ottomans themselves—viewed this expansion as the fulfillment of a divine mandate, and interpreted historical events in what in today's parlance would be deemed "religious" terms. Thus the fusing of a sort of Eliadean *illo tempus*² with lived history; the patterning of historical narratives according to the kingly formulations of *Chronicles* and other Biblical books; the rereading of messianic prophecy in light of Ottoman ascendancy—all can be found in a number of important Jewish histories, most all Sephardic, of the period. Eliyahu Kapsali's *sefer eliyahu zuta* (Order of Eliyahu the Younger), Abraham Zacuto's *sefer yuhasin* (Book of Genealogies), Solomon Ibn Verga's *shebet yehudah* (The Scepter of Judah), Samul Usque's *Consolaçam as tribulaçoens de Israel* (A Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel), and Yosef Hakohen's *dibrei hayamim lemalkei zarefat umalkei bet ottoman hatogar* (History of the Kings of France and of the Kings of the Ottomans) all include such themes and motivations. Many of these were directly concerned with the rise of Ottoman power, and, specifically, its import within a Jewish messianic perspective.

Not surprisingly, during this period, and particularly in the western Ottoman provinces, there was a sudden renewal of historical writing by Jews after fifteen centuries of near complete historiographic silence.³ Again, most of this was the product of Sephardic writers. It is certain that the experience of the expulsions was a major catalyst for Jewish historical writing in the 16th century. Some of the writers were themselves self-conscious about the long gap in Jewish historical writing, and the effect that the expulsions had had in terms of spurring its renewal. As Joseph Hacoen wrote,

All of my people are aware that no author has arisen in Israel [since after] . . . the war of the land of Judea and of Jerusalem. The chroniclers ceased in Israel, they ceased, until I, Joseph, did arise, until I did arise, a chronicler in Israel! And I set my heart to write

as a remembrance in a book the bulk of the troubles that have been visited upon us in gentile lands, from the day that Judah was exiled from its land until the present day.⁴

For such chroniclers, the immediate context of these "troubles," as Hacoen so understatedly put it, was the series of decrees forcing Iberian Jews to convert to Catholicism or leave Spanish and Portuguese lands. But a broader global context was at work, as well. The final fall of Byzantium and the rise of the Ottomans as a European and a Mediterranean power; the increasing ties between Europe and the Americas; the intensification of commerce in the Indian ocean; the unification of Spain and the mass exile from Iberia of European Jewry to all corners of the world—each a seismic event in its own right—all were interconnected and had an impact on one another. Together, they gave the impression of a world in the midst of dramatic, indeed apocalyptic, change.

The Rise of the Ottomans as Divine Plan

"The story of what happened in the last war that our Gran Senor Suleiman undertook, may he rest in glory, and of the method of rule of his son Selim, and may God make him prosper . . ." Thus opens the *Cronica de los Reyes Otomanos* of Moshe ben Baruch Almosnino, the great Salonican Sephardic rabbi, political counselor, and sometime historian of the sixteenth century. Written "in Constantinople, on a Wednesday, the 28th of Kislev, in the year 5327 of the creation of the world, on the 11th of December,"⁵ the *Cronica* is a unique document, a contemporary historical account of the Ottoman Empire at its territorial and administrative apogee. The reign of Selim the first (1512–1520) and particularly of his son Suleiman the first (1520–1566) marked the intensive pinnacle of Ottoman expansion. In what was thought to be year 5327 of the creation of the world, that is, 1566—the year of Suleiman's death—Moises Almosnino sat down to write his account of the Ottoman ruling house. Even without the perspective so often offered only by hind-

sight, he grasped that the death of Suleiman was to bring a tidal, if gradual, shift to Ottoman fortunes. Three weeks before starting the *Cronica*, Almosnino had witnessed the arrival of Suleiman's remains, brought in state to Constantinople for burial. The sight was clearly one to make an impression:

The dead king entered Constantinople on Thursday, the 10th of Kislev, which was the 22nd of November . . . And as they reached the gates of the city with the dead king, they took him from the carriage . . . and carried him [through the crowd, chanting] into the city with their hands held high, passing him from one to the other . . . until they reached the tomb.

The story of Suleiman's rise some four and a half decades earlier had been chronicled by another Jewish historian and Rabbi, the Cretan Romaniot Eliyahu ben Elqana Kapsali. Kapsali's account of the Mediterranean world in which he lived, is paradigmatic of Jewish writing of the period in casting Sultan Suleiman as a prophetic messianic figure.⁶ Kapsali, from Candia (present-day Iraklion) in Crete, is best known as the author of the *sefer eliyahu zouta*, the "The Order of Little Eliyahu" (that is, "the younger"—in distinction to his grandfather, also Rabbi Eliyahu Kapsali).⁷ The term "*sefer*"—that is, "the order"—refers to the order of the world. The book is a global history—a history, that is, of the globe as it looked to Kapsali in his day.⁸

The work as a whole begins, however, in mythic time—with the creation of the world. The *sefer eliyahu zuta* does not make a distinction between mythic time—what Kapsali calls "matters of the world" (*dvarim olamim*); that is, the creation of the world, the sins of Adam and Eve in paradise, the flood, and so on—and lived historical time as he experienced it. The creation, the flood, the rise of Muhammad, the conquest of Constantinople—all were events that existed on the same continuum.⁹ In this regard, too, it is paradigmatic of Jewish histories of the period.

These two texts, Kapsali's *sefer* and Almosnino's *Cronica*, both in some vague sense "Jewish," give us two different views of the mean-

ing—both historical and religious—of the rise of the Ottomans. For Almosnino, their ascendancy is largely an event in human history—*historia profana*—while for Kapsali the staggering growth in Ottoman power is an event in the gradual unfolding of the divine plan on earth, what we would call *historia sacra*. For both, however, it was deeply significant. Neither Almosnino nor Kapsali wanted to write a history of the Jews, *per se*, and their texts are not exclusively—or even predominantly—about Jews or Jewish matters. When compared to other Jewish histories of the period, such as Ibn Verga's *shebet yehudah* or Ibn Yahia's *shalshet hakabala*, these two histories stand out for the breadth of their interest in the non-Jewish world. Even Kapsali, the less "secular" of the two, is explicit in explaining that his interest in *dvarim olamim* ("matters of the world") is in distinction to what he calls *dinim toriim*, "legal matters," and *divrei hachmei hamekubalim*, kabbalistic knowledge—that is, religious topics.¹⁰ The "matters of the world" with which he is concerned are what we today would term "history," in a secular, or at least proto-secular, sense, and the *olam*—the world—about which he writes, though God's creation, is not an exclusively Jewish sphere. But both of these realms—the divine and the secular—were part of a massive, divine, historical plan, one that figures such as Kapsali and Almosnino felt to be unfolding right before their very eyes.

The Fall of Constantinople

In reading the history of Suleiman as a prophetic messianic history, Kapsali and Almosnino were not simply being "Jewish" historians. Reading the rise of Ottoman power as an apocalyptic event, an eruption of transcendent time into the realm of historical time, was hardly uniquely Jewish. It was major preoccupation of Christian writers of the period, as well. A growing body of scholarship testifies to the crescendo of apocalyptic and messianic thought, stretching from the western shores of Europe to the eastern Ottoman hinterland. Here again, the relevant backdrop was an interlocking

series of events ranging from the decline of Byzantium, to Spanish Atlantic exploration, to the Iberian expulsions, to Ottoman Expansion, to the rise of Sabbateanism in the late seventeenth century.

In the case of Greek-speaking Orthodox Christian chroniclers, for example, there was significant overlap with the interpretive prisms of their Jewish historian counterparts. After all, the Orthodox Christian populations of the south and eastern Mediterranean had some mere fifty years before the decrees of expulsion suffered what they, too, regarded as a sort of exile and destruction: the final demise of the Byzantine Empire, brought with the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Sultan "Fatih" Mehmet—Mehmet the Conqueror, Mehmet I—in 1453.¹¹ Just as Jewish writers regarded the expulsions from both a religious and secular perspective, the collapse of Christian temporal power in the region was interpreted by Orthodox Christian thinkers through the lens of biblical prophetic and Hellenic traditions.

The religio-apocalyptic dimensions of such lines of interpretation took multiple forms. Millenarian thought attached itself to the events of 1453, according to which the fall of Constantinople—a "thousand year city"¹²—was read as one of the sufferings and lamentations foretold by biblical prophetic tradition as forerunners to a messianic age. Numerous apocalyptic Greek Orthodox folk traditions attached themselves to the Ottoman conquest of the city. For example, the absence in contemporary accounts of any record of the death of emperor Constantine XI Palaiologos (last spotted in battle against the Ottomans on the city ramparts on May 29, 1453), combined with the fact that the emperor's body was never found, fed a millenarian belief that he had been lifted up by God, and would be returned to earth only upon the restoration of the city to the Greeks.

Similarly, one strong strand of early modern Greek Orthodox apocalyptic thought argued that "*itan thélima theóu i póli na tourképsi*"—that is, "It was the will of God for the city to fall to the Turks."¹³ This reading, like the one by Kapsali, viewed the rise to power of the Ottoman dynasty as having been a direct act of the hand of God, and the domination of the region by the Muslim Turks was

regarded as one of the signs of the end times, a harbinger of the coming apocalypse. In Kapsali's account, the Ottomans had been sent by God to establish a reign of peace and safety, but by most Christian interpretations of the meaning of Ottoman power, the Turks had been sent to punish the Christians and to warn them to mend their heretic ways. As with Kapsali, this Christian interpretation drew heavily on the prophetic texts of the Hebrew Bible—particularly Jeremiah and Isaiah, with their detailed accounts of the wickedness, punishment, and ultimate redemption of God's people.¹⁴

A still more distant frame of reference was found, by some observers, in ancient Greek tradition. The Hellenist chronicler Chalcocondylas, for instance, one of several eyewitness observers who penned accounts of the fall of Constantinople, commented that some of his Roman contemporaries thought that the fall of the city was a long-deferred evening of the scales for the sack of Troy!

[The Fall of Constantinople] was surely the most grievous catastrophe known to history, and the complete destruction of the Greeks matches the Fall of Troy, a capture of Troy by the Barbarians, as it were. So the Romans think that this disaster overtook the Greeks as recompense for the sack of Troy long ago.¹⁵

In the case of both Mediterranean Jewish and Greek Orthodox thought, the Catholic West stood as the ultimate symbol of aggression, heresy, and hate. Just as the "troubles" of the Jews had been "visited upon [them] in gentile lands" that were Catholic, the "troubles" of the Greek Orthodox also had over the centuries been most potently experienced at the hands of the Catholic West.

Almosnino's text is preoccupied with Suleiman's battles with "Siguetvar" (Hungary) and particularly with Vienna ("*que llaman Bech*"),¹⁶ an interest that reflects his joyous fascination with the prospect that the Catholic West—the cause of so much Jewish suffering—might be brought to its knees. Meanwhile, for the Greek Orthodox, the doctrines of Catholicism were a heresy, and the Greeks, for having dabbled in that heresy, were being punished by God through the fall of the Constantinople.

The Council of Florence (1438–45), which met successively at Ferrara (1438–39), Florence (1439–43), and Rome (1443–45), had as its prime aim to reunite the churches of the East and West. In the context of Byzantine decline, reunion with the West would clearly have been desirable to the leaders of Constantinople, who desperately needed military assistance against the looming threat of the Ottomans. The council's Decree of Union, signed by Greek and Roman representatives on 5 July 1439, was, however, purely cosmetic, and the majority of Constantinopolitans regarded it as an act of betrayal on the part of their church.¹⁷ The fall of the City, then, was read as a punitive act, aimed at the heresy of those Greeks who had allowed for union, however superficial, to be pursued.¹⁸

So it is that the two great ruptures of early modern Mediterranean history—the successive expulsions of the Jews from the Iberian peninsula and the conquest of Constantinople—were both understood by their respective communities as being intimately linked to the same constellation of factors. In both cases, the horrors of Catholic doctrine were read as an underlying cause—in the Sephardic instance, of course, most explicitly. Sephardic historians claimed that the expulsions were a punishment for Jewish conversions to Catholicism¹⁹ while Orthodox thinkers interpreted the fall of Constantinople as a punishment for Orthodox conversions to Catholicism. Both events were intimately linked to the rise of Ottoman power in the region. For the Jews, the Ottomans were an instrument of redemption; for most Greeks, a tool of punishment. For both, however, the Ottomans represented hope that the Catholic West might at last be overcome. Finally, both the expulsions and the fall of Constantinople, in their respective contexts, were read through the prism of Biblical prophetic tradition, understood as alternately apocalyptic, millenarian, and messianic events.

Thus, from the outset, the Jewish and Greek Orthodox communities of the western Ottoman provinces were at once bound together and set apart from one another by the experience of Ottoman subjugation. On the one hand, Jew and Christian alike were subject peoples: both were organized according to confession; both

were subject to specific economic and social strictures. On the other hand, the official narrative (propagated largely by the Church and its representatives) of the Greek Orthodox was that subjugation to Ottoman rule was an enslavement, a punishment and burden, an oppressive condition from which deliverance was ultimately to come. In contrast, for the Jews, subjection to Ottoman rule was (comparatively, at least) a form of liberation, the first step in the gradual progress toward a messianic age in which all Jews would be safe, free, and vindicated to the world.

Again, the broader global context constantly framed and conditioned these interpretations, and to a large extent accounts for their convergence. Most salient is that the 16th-century rise of Ottoman power in the Mediterranean came largely at the expense of Catholic European powers. The most significant island conquests of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw the Knights of Saint John lose Rhodes (1522–23); and the Venetians, Cyprus (1571) and Crete (1645–1669). The (largely Romaniot) Jewish populations of these islands, like the expelled Sephardim, thus had a powerful memory of the experience of subjugation to Catholicism. Other Jewish communities of the region, most notably that of Corfu, were to remain continuously under Catholic rule until the modern period.

Jewish identity, like Greek Orthodox identity, was negotiated in a complex and relatively heterogeneous context. Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity, and Islam all exercised—at different times and in different ways—varying degrees of social control over the Jewish communities of the south Balkans. But they also were in competition with one another. The social and political competition amongst different communal groups shaped Jewish identity just as strongly as did the presence of any one form of political domination.

The Iberian Expulsions and the Move East

Such concerns, and the ways in which they were framed by religious history, are best exemplified by Kapsali's *seder eliyahu zuta*,

which is also typical in its preoccupation with the meaning of the eastward movement of masses of people, and of the center of power in the Mediterranean. The context of deeply enmeshed communities allowed Kapsali to accomplish two narrative tasks at once: the *seder eliyahu zuta* simultaneously contributes to the ongoing narrative of Jewish history—the biblical narrative of destruction, punishment, prophecy, and redemption—and provides a wholly new historical narrative, a contemporary and distinctively Mediterranean account of the 16th-century apogee of Ottoman power, specifically, of what it meant that the new Jewish world was likely to be not Catholic, but Muslim.

The means through which Kapsali accomplished this dual feat did not rely merely on clever exegetical interpretation. The primary “source texts” for his seder were the Bible and the living history of which he was a part: the fall of Constantinople; the rise of the Ottomans; the expulsion of the Jewish populations from the Iberian peninsula and, later, Italy; and their “redemption” and “salvation” in Ottoman lands.

The books of Jeremiah and Isaiah, which are dominated by the theme of a scattered people, searching for physical safety and spiritual redemption, seemed to Kapsali’s mind not merely prophetic, but accurate in their description of his contemporary time. The promise of Jeremiah was the promise that just as the Israelites were led by God out of the land of Egypt, so too would they in future generations “live in their own land” (Jeremiah 23:8).

In the context of early modern Mediterranean apocalypticism—Jewish and Christian alike—such traditions were connected to the notion of an “Israel” more conceptual than literal; a place that was characterized by safety and peace. Again, they were based on a prophetic that was more of the present than the future. For Eliyahu Kapsali, who daily saw the expelled Jews from Sepharad arriving at the waterfront in his hometown of Candia, it was no leap to read Venetian Crete—and, even more, the Ottoman domains of Suleiman, of which he hoped Crete would soon be one—as a sort of “Israel,” the promised land of peace and deliverance, ruled over by a just and righteous king.

The Jewish literature of the period is replete with examples of this vision. Eliyahu of Pesaro, for example, an Italian Jew who traveled the Mediterranean in 1563, is typical in this regard. In a letter of that year, written in Hebrew, Eliyahu describes his trip from Venice to Famagusta, Cyprus.²⁰ He had had as his initial intention to carry on to the Holy Land, but a rumor of pestilence prevented him from doing so. He stayed on instead in Famagusta, where he made the acquaintance of Rabbi Eliezer Ashkenazi (later chief Rabbi of Krakow), with whom he studied for two years.²¹ In the process he fell in love with the island, which he came to regard as a sort of promised land. He wished only to bring his friends and family, “I would not ask for more from God than he might implant the idea in the heart of some decent personalities from the provinces of Italy to decide to come to us and live here. For there is nothing better for them and for their descendants than this.”

The pleasures of Cyprus were material and divine, the realization of prophetic promise and the relief of a very real religious refuge. Quoting from the *Song of Songs*, he rhapsodized, “The man who will decide to stay in the courts of Famagusta . . . will eat precious fruits, Henna with spikenard plants . . .” (*Song of Songs* 4:13).²² Cyprus was the land of deliverance, a place of freedom for the “enslaved” Jews of Sepharad. As Eliyahu concluded, “In truth—whoever lives here belongs to those who eat manna.”²³

Given the status of Jews in 16th-century Europe, and the recent memory of the expulsions, it is easy to understand how Jews like Kapsali and Eliyahu of Pesaro could come to such conclusions. More potent, perhaps, is the fact that the expulsions—horrible though they were—had provided the catalyst for the eastward movement of hundreds of thousands of Jews. Although this movement did not take most of them as far as the literal Jerusalem, many felt that they had found the promised land simply by moving from the west toward the east. For some south Balkan Jews, such as the Sephardim of Thessaloniki, this feeling was to continue for well over three hundred years. This, too, had a powerful effect on shaping the context as an apocalyptic and messianic one. Catastrophe and victory were but two sides of the same coin.

The Jewish sense that the Turks represented liberation and safety; a Christian attitude of fear and ambivalence—is characteristic of communal responses throughout the Balkans and the Mediterranean to the rise of Ottoman power. The communal division in attitude toward the Ottomans was to remain in place over the course of the next four centuries, and would come to constitute one of the major lines of tension between the Jewish and Christian communities of the region. At the end of the Ottoman period, the processes of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were effectively reversed: just as Ottoman conquest had spread from east to west, greeted by Jews and feared by Christians, from the eighteenth century on, the Ottomans began to lose their westernmost territories to the rise of Christian nation-states—a process feared by Ottoman Jews, who knew that the return of Christian power would likely bring about a downturn in their fortunes.

Cretan Jews on the eve of the Ottoman Conquest

If from the Jewish perspective, the rise of the Ottomans represented a hope of salvation in the East, a string of tragedies on the ground, set against the broader backdrop of the expulsions, stood as reminder of what the Jews needed to be saved *from*. In the case of Crete's Jews, these events included a series of tragedies that threatened the physical and spiritual well-being of the community. The first of these was a famine that struck the island in the latter half of the fifteenth century, sometime late in the 1460s or 70s.²⁴ The famine hit during the *condostableria* (leadership) of David Kapsali, Eliyahu Kapsali's uncle. A list of the *terminazioni* (rulings) and their authors from that period indicates that the leaders of the *kahal* compelled the Venetian authorities to intercede on behalf of the community. "There was a great famine throughout the island of Candia . . . and [the people] were dying of hunger, [and David Kapsali negotiated] a *terminazion* according to which the authorities were to give flour to the Jews as well [i.e., not only to the Christians], a set number of bags per week; and also this esteemed

condostabla used to take the flour each week to his house, bake it, and distribute it to the poor."²⁵

In 1507 and again in 1549, the island was struck by major earthquakes. The 1549 quake appears to have had particularly devastating effects on the Jewish quarter, which had still not fully rebuilt after the damage of 1507. Few Jewish lives, however, were lost, while amongst the Christians many perished. In commemoration of this apparent miracle Kapsali enacted "a decree of fasting concerning the earthquake that happened in 1549," designed as at once a penitential act and a sign of gratitude toward the divine:

On the 17th of Elul, year 5309 of the Creation, the 10th of September 1549 to the gentiles, in the fourth hour of the day, that day was a dark day, there was not happiness in it. There happened in the island of Candia a great and terrible quake, and the earth mumbled and jumbled, and the foundations of the mountains were upset, to the point that we despaired and thought that we were all lost. And since the time of the first quake [i.e., 1507], we had not seen a quake like this one, and since God was merciful on us, He did not let the destruction come to our houses even though there were within our *kahal* several houses crumbling and broken since the time of the first quake, that took place on the first of Temmuz in the year 5268 of the Creation, at one o'clock at night. [During the current quake] not even one parcel fell to the ground. On the contrary, among the gentiles and particularly in the central square, the destruction made a great impact on many of the houses. And when I saw this great trouble, and how God saved us [i.e., the Jews] in his great mercy, and the houses did not fall, and the earth did not open its mouth to swallow us alive, I decided to act for Hashem [i.e., to give thanks to God].²⁶

The action, specifically, was to consist of three fasts: on the following Thursday, the following Monday, and then on the second Thursday following the earthquake.

Most devastating of all, however, was the plague, that broke out in Crete in 1523. In that year an epidemic of an unknown nature, likely

the bubonic plague, devastated the urban communities of Crete. It has been conjectured that the plague originated in Rhodes and was brought to Crete by refugees in the wake of the wars between Venice and the Turks during the conquest of that island.²⁷ This is the explanation that Kapsali gave for the pestilence's arrival in Crete. He elaborates that the outbreak had initially been caused by the lax burial practices in Rhodes during the course of the siege and the abundance of dead and decaying bodies within the citadel.

Kapsali dedicated two chapters of his *seder* to descriptions of the epidemic, and provides a ghastly picture of life in Candia at its height, which came just after Passover of 1523. Again, the *condostabulo* was compelled to intercede with the Venetian authorities on behalf of the Jews. The result in this case was that Jews were ultimately subject to kinder treatment than were their Christian counterparts: When the authorities began a policy of exiling the sick to the outlying islet of Dia (where they were left to die), a delegation was sent to plead with the authorities on behalf of sick Jews, asking that they be given a special place of quarantine rather than be left on Dia. The authorities granted this wish and allowed for the sick Jews to go to the Akrotiri, a spit of land protruding into the sea to the west of town. There many of them died, but according to Kapsali more than ten were cured, and they later returned to Candia. Christian victims, meanwhile, were exiled to Dia, where, if they did not die of the plague, they perished of starvation and exposure to the elements.

In the Kahal itself, shortly after Passover more than ten individuals died in one night, and subsequently it was decreed by the authorities that no Jews would be allowed to leave the Jewish quarter, much less enter the district of the gentiles. The Jewish quarter was identified as a site of infection, which it may well have been, as many of the Rhodes refugees were Jews and would have upon their arrival in Crete settled in the *zudecca*. Be this as it may, the policy of containment was clearly also a mere extension of the general regulations constantly in place that were directed toward keeping the Jews confined and set apart from Christian society.

Kapsali was one of four Jews appointed by the Venetian authori-

ties to be responsible for containing the epidemic within the walls of the *kahal*. The Venetians closed the gates, allowing no one to go into the quarter, and no one to come out. Those Jews who managed to sneak out began to flee the city, taking refuge in the countryside, where many of them died. Meanwhile, the situation within the Jewish quarter grew worse as a result of the Venetian policies of containment, for there, too, soon emerged the problems of burial that had first initiated the outbreak in Rhodes. Dead bodies were left to decay or illegally thrown into the harbor. Finally, "Leon Harofe," a Jewish physician intervened; he was in the good graces of the authorities, whom he persuaded to grant him permission to come and go as he pleased, and who gave him the keys to the gate, so he was able to remove the dead from the *kahal* and bring food from outside into it.²⁸

Aside from the manifest physical horrors of these catastrophes plague, Kapsali was troubled by their theological and eschatological implications. Much of the rabbinic leadership of the *kahal* were victims of the plague, for instance, and in late spring of 1523 Kapsali brooded in solitude, writing eulogies (*kinot*) to his fallen colleagues, among them Rabbi Shaul Hacohen, the leader of the *beit hakneset shel kohanim*.²⁹ In the *seder eliyahu zuta* Kapsali describes his utter despair and depression, and his attempts to find solace in writing and in study.³⁰ As he sat and wrote the *seder*, he constantly consulted the Talmud and, particularly, the Kabbalah, which he felt provided a connection between these events and the apocalypse as foretold by Jewish prophetic and mystical literature. The *seder* was thus in equal part an eyewitness, even pseudo-anthropological, account of the earthquakes and plague and a scholarly meditation on Kapsali's time as the beginning of the apocalyptic and messianic age of Jewish prophetic tradition.

Of central concern was the meaning of human suffering. The portions of the *seder* that sought to understand the plague in light of biblical prophetic were supplemented by another text Kapsali authored that same year, the *mahberet ko'ah adonai* ("The Might of God"), a reiteration of the events of the plague and a discussion regarding the philosophical problem of theodicy.³¹ Behind all

this stood the experience of the *gerushim*, the expulsions, which marked a rupture of such dramatic proportions that they heightened the impact and import of all other sufferings inflicted on the Jewish community in the period. The specific content of these sufferings lent itself well to biblical interpretation and reinterpretation. Exile, plague, famine—all were familiar as the sufferings of the Jewish people during their enslavement in Egypt. As such, they were read as a cyclical revisit of other traumatic periods in Jewish history. Thus, as in *Exodus*, these sufferings were taken as a prelude to liberation, redemption, and return to Israel.

For Kapsali, the signs of the end were all around: the expelled milling around beside the harbor, telling the horrible tales of the expulsion; famine; earthquakes; plague. Nonetheless, on the horizon loomed the prospect of liberation in the form of the Ottomans and their leader Suleiman.

The plague coincided with Suleiman's first year in power, and, to Kapsali's mind, the horrors of the former were linked to the marvels of the latter. Suleiman, the messianic deliverer, would lead the Jews of Crete out of their bondage to the Venetians and bring Israel to their shores. Kapsali was convinced that the Ottoman presence was immediately at hand, and, with it, the beginning of a Messianic age. As it turned out, he was to die a century before the island of Crete fell to the Turks. The decades-long Venetian defense of Candia (1648–69) would prove to be the greatest test yet of the *kahal's* endurance, for the physical and financial burdens of the prolonged war fell particularly heavily on Crete's Jews. Venice, having already lost Cyprus, was determined to keep its last major holding in the Mediterranean, and no expense was spared in the effort to rebuff the Ottomans.³² Kapsali's optimistic vision of the meaning of Ottoman ascendancy, however, was not wholly misplaced. The Ottoman period was to bring Candia's Jews an unprecedented degree of freedom and influence. Kapsali's copious writings—his *takanot*, his histories, and his rabbinics—provide us with a rare point of entry into the social and cultural world of 16th-century Romaniot life. They show it to have been a world filled equally with uncertainty and hope.

Summary

The early modern period, and particularly the rise of Ottoman power, was profoundly influential in shaping the South Balkans as an interstitial region, one at the margins of both the Christian West and the Islamic East. The standard depiction of the Balkans as betwixt and between, simultaneously oriental and occidental, so ubiquitous in modern writing on the region, has its origins in the geopolitical shifts of the early modern period.³³ The Jews of the South Balkans, within this framework, were doubly in-between. The centuries'-long struggle between the East and the West was, with many nuances, fundamentally a struggle between Christian and Muslim dominion.³⁴ For the Jews, who were not a significant component in the equation, there was never any question of being the winners. The most that the Jewish communities of the region could hope for was the triumph of a winner that would treat them relatively less harshly. The Ottoman period came to be a "Golden Age" for Sephardic Jewry. But this "Golden Age" was relative only to the prior oppressions of the Catholic West and the future oppressions of modern European nationalisms. The complex and multiple transformations within the Jewish communities of Crete, Rhodes, and Thessaloniki in the early modern period established a framework within which these communities were increasingly, and ineluctably, caught between the changing fortunes of the East and the West.

Given the dramatic mix of cultural currents within which they found themselves, it is no surprise that rabbinic and communal leaders began in this period to engage, along with their more strictly religious and communal functions, in the writing and recording of the historical events of their period, in the analysis of their causes, and in the crafting of historical narratives that would seek to explain the dramatic changes that they saw all around them.³⁵ The writing of histories was part and parcel also of a broader literary efflorescence that characterized the Jewish communities of the period, one that consisted largely of strictly "religious" writing,³⁶ but that also pointed to a new interest in the broader world in which those communities suddenly found themselves.

The history of these numerous communal transformations and geographical movements is not specifically, or solely, a Jewish history. All of these ruptures and developments took place amidst major global transformation, and the concerns of the Jewish communities of the South Balkans were analogous to those of numerous communities—Catholic, Orthodox, and Muslim—throughout southern Europe and the Mediterranean in the early modern period. The final fall of Byzantium and the rise of the Ottomans as a European and a Mediterranean power; the increasing ties between Europe and the Americas; the intensification of commerce in the Indian ocean; the decline of Catholic power in the Mediterranean; the unification of Spain and the mass exile of European Jewry to all corners of the world—all were interconnected and had an impact on one another.

The expulsions from Sepharad were not merely an event in Jewish history, but in global and Mediterranean history. Only within this broader context that developments within the various *kehilot* of the South Balkans can be understood. Equally, the broader historical context is complete only if the history of the Jews is included as one of its central components, for the Jewish communities of the South Balkans were at the heart of many of the developments that characterized that context, and were eyewitnesses to a number of its major transformations.

Notes

¹Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi. *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982, p. 9.

²Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971.

³As Yosef Yerushalmi has so famously written, “The resurgence of Jewish historical writing in the sixteenth century was without parallel earlier in the Middle Ages . . . Only in the sixteenth century do we encounter within Jewry a cultural phenomenon that can be recognized with little hesitation as genuinely historiographic. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, pp. 57–58.

⁴*dibrei hayamim lemalkei zarefat umalkei bet otoman hatogar*, preface (Sabionetta, ed.). Cited in Yerushalmi, p. 61.

⁵Almosnino, *Cronica de los Reyes Otomanos*. Barcelona: Editorial Tirocinio, 1998, Libro I, 1, p. 59

⁶See K. E. Fleming, “South Balkan Rabbinic Readings of Ottoman Rise and Decline: Eliyahu Kapsali of Crete and Yehuda Alkalai of Zemlin,” in *Greece and the Balkans: Identities, Perceptions and Cultural Encounters since the Enlightenment*, Dimitri Tziouvas, ed. Surrey: Ashgate, 2003, pp. 101–113.

⁷Of his grandfather, Kapsali wrote “My venerable master, my eminent ancestor, Rabbi Eliyahu Kapsali, of blessed memory . . . my name is the same as his; may my path resemble his!” (*no'am ve hobalim*, cited in *Chronique de l'expulsion Seder eliahou zouta*, Simone Sultan-Bohbot, ed. Paris: Editions Cerf, p. 16, n.21).

⁸Somewhat surprisingly, the title has been more often translated incorrectly than correctly; it is usually rendered as either “The Little Order of Eliyahu” or “The Book of Little Eliyahu”—the latter a clear misreading of “*sefer*” for “*sefer*,” the former a misplacing of the adjective “*zuta*,” that is, “little.” Kapsali makes clear in his introduction why he refers to himself as “*zuta*.”

⁹*Seder eliyahu zuta A'* (Vol. 1, pp. 12–13). Here Kapsali outlines the contents of his book.

¹⁰“*ve lifamim nitkavanti lirshom biktsat min hamekomot ktsat dinim toriim, veshemetz davar meat misaer lo kabir midivrei hachmei hamekubalim.*” (And at some times [in this text] I intended to write in a few places a few legal precepts, and a little bit smaller than small – nothing big – from the words of the kabbalists) Here Kapsali states that religious knowledge is divided into two categories – legal precepts and kabala – and that his *sefer* is only concerned with them to a very small extent. The real topic of inquiry is something other than religious knowledge. It is “*dvarim olamim*”—matters of the world. (Vol. A, p. 12).

¹¹Indeed, the development of modern Greek nationalism and of Zionism some four hundred years later were to follow remarkably similar trajectories, in large part because both groups would come to understand themselves as exiled. For the Greeks, this sense of exile began with the 1453 fall of Constantinople. For the Jews of the western Ottoman provinces the longstanding biblical exilic tradition would be historically instantiated first by the expulsions from Spain, then by the Greek conquest of Thessaloniki.

¹²330 CE marks the formal establishment of the city, under Constantine I (“The Great”), but it was widely understood as being one thousand years old at the time of the Ottoman conquest.

¹³“Ἦταν Θέλημα Θεοῦ ἢ Πῶλη να Τουρκέψει” In “τῆς αγίας Σοφίας” (of Saint Sophia), in N. G. Politis, ed. *Eklogai apo ta Tragoudia tou Ellinikou Laou* (Selections of Songs of the Greek People). Athens: E.G. Vagionaki, p. 13, l.11.

¹⁴There were, however, Greeks who saw the rise of the Ottomans as a con-

tinuation and revivification of Roman Imperial tradition—much as Mehmet the Conqueror seems to have viewed himself. Kritoboulos, for instance, appointed governor of the Aegean island of Imbros by Mehmet I, embraced the events of 1453 as a sign of ongoing continuity of Caesarine rule.

¹⁵J.R. Melville Jones, p. 54.

¹⁶That is, Beç, the Turkish name for Vienna. *Cronica*, p. 61.

¹⁷See K.E. Fleming, "The Question of Union and the Fall of Constantinople," in *Modern Greek Studies Yearbook*, Vol. 12/13 (1996/97), pp. 35–48.

¹⁸Conversely, those Greeks who supported union read the fall as a punishment directed against the opponents of union. Doukas, an obscure figure in Genoese employ, was a Greek supporter of union with the West who wrote a contemporary account of the fall of Constantinople. In his work, the Bible books of Isaiah and Amos function as the prophetic sources which forecast the fall of the city, and the sense that the Turkish conquest is a just fulfillment of prophecy runs throughout his account. Mehmet, the agent of punishment, is a "flesh-eating devil," "a fierce and bloodthirsty tyrant," and the very embodiment of Nebuchadnezzar.

¹⁹For a very quick overview, see Bel Bravo, "The Expulsion of the Spanish Jews as seen by Christian and Jewish Chroniclers," pp. 55–73, especially p. 71. (Note, though, that Bel Bravo incorrectly identifies Kapsali as "a descendant from the Jews expelled from Sefarad" [p.62]. While Sephardic on one side, he fully identified himself as Romaniot, and, in any event, his Sephardic ancestry dated its presence in Crete to long before the time of the expulsions.)

²⁰Joseph Shatzmiller, "travelling in the Mediterranean in 1563: The Testimony of Eliahu of Pesaro," in Ariel Toaff and Simon Schwartzfuchs, eds., *The Mediterranean and the Jews: Banking, Finance and International Trade (XVI-XVII Centuries)*, Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1989, pp. 237–248.

²¹Shatzmiller, p. 239

²²Shatzmiller, p. 240.

²³Shatzmiller, p. 240.

²⁴The famine is recorded in *takanot* dating from the *condostableria* of David Kapsali, Eliyahu Kapsali's uncle. He was twice *condostablos*, once in 1468 and again in 1478. The Venetian Duke of Crete at the time was Duke Moro, whose rule overlapped with both.

²⁵*reshimat pe'ulotehem shel condostabli ahadim*, in *takanot kandia*, p. 41. Negotiating between the Jewish *kahal* as a whole and the Venetian authorities was one of the most important of the *condostablos*' duties. Their repeated success in so doing reflects the relatively high degree to which the Jews of the island were recognized as having certain fundamental (if also negotiable) rights and privileges.

²⁶*takanot kandia*, *takana* 105 (September, 10 [?], 1549), p. 39.

²⁷Benayahu, *ish kandia*, pp. 121–122.

²⁸*seder eliyahu zuta B'*, chapter 165, pp.106–108.

²⁹Included in the *seder eliyahu zuta B'*, pp. 205–211.

³⁰*seder eliyahu zuta B'*, chapter 166, p.109.

³¹Included in the *seder eliyahu zuta B'*, pp. 113–145.

³²For an excellent account of the Venetian mentality during the siege see Gino Benzoni, "Morire Per Creta" (To Die for Crete), in Gherardo Ortalli, ed., *Venezia e Creta. Atti del convegno internazionale di studie Iraklion-Chania, 30 settembre-5 ottobre 1997*. Venice: Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti, 1998, pp. 151–173.

³³See K.E. Fleming, "Orientalism, the Balkans, and Balkan Historiography," in *American Historical Review*, Vol. 104, No. 4 (October, 2000), pp. 1218–1233.

³⁴Q.v. Mark Mazower's emphasis on the importance in the Balkan context of "... the deep rift of incomprehension that lies between the worlds of Christianity and Islam, which for more than a millenium – from the seventh century until at least the end of the seventeenth – were locked in a complex struggle for territory and minds in Europe." Mark Mazower, *The Balkans: A Short History*. New York: The Modern Library, 2000, p. xxxi.

³⁵An overview of Jewish historical writing of the period is provided by Maria Bel Bravo, "The Expulsion of the Spanish Jews as seen by Christian and Jewish Chroniclers," in I. K. Hassiotis, ed., *The Jewish Communities of Southeastern Europe. From the Fifteenth Century to the End of World War II*. Thessaloniki: Institute for Balkan Studies, 1997, pp. 55–73. Note, though, that the article is more useful as a bibliographic overview than as a source for factual information, a certain amount of which is incomplete or incorrect.

³⁶An overview of Sephardic presses and literary production in Ottoman territories can be found in Jane Gerber, *The Jews of Spain*, New York: The Free Press, 1992, pp. 158–161.