Treasure Hunt

Jews, Property, Catastrophe

Ido Noy

Isaac the Pious came to the house of his ancestors [Rabbi David the Parnas and his wife] to check the treasures which had been hidden there from the days of his ancestors. He came to the cellar and found them, for the enemy had not touched them. He said to himself: "Of what value is all this money to me now, since the enemy 'fulfilled their purposes,' distancing me from the Lord and to causing me to rebel against the Torah of our holy God. Moreover, a certain priest requested that I recover [the treasure] with him. Will I find any further merit in this money? Neither silver nor gold accompanies a man to the grave – only repentance and good deeds.[1]

Chronicle of Solomon son of Samson, Germany, mid-twelfth century

1 "Chronicle of Solomon son of Samson," in *European Jewry and the First Crusade*, ed. Robert Chazan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 263.

Fig. 1. Miscellany of jewelry, part of the Weißenfels Treasure, discovered in 1823-6 near Weißenfels. Hidden circa 1348/9. Kulturstiftung Sachsen-Anhalt, Kunstmuseum Moritzburg Halle (Saale). Photograph by Punctum/ Bertram Kober.

This brief excerpt from the *Chronicle of Solomon son of Samson* tells one of many stories concerning the events in Mainz at the time of the First Crusade (1096), during the persecutions of Jewish communities in the Rhineland region. The source describes how a certain Isaac the Pious, son of R. David the Parnas, was forced to convert to Christianity. He returned to his parents' house and found the fortune that his father, one of community leaders, had hidden before his death. The text goes on to describe his repentance and return to Judaism.

This dramatic description sheds light on a common phenomenon in the pre-modern era – the hiding property of for security purposes. When it comes to medieval Jews, we are fortunate to have not only historical evidence, but also archaeological findings – as many as ten treasure troves attributed to Jewish owners have been discovered over the last 200 years. Some parameters can help us identify a Jewish treasure trove.[2] The first is the archaeological and chronological context of the findings – do the location and time of burial fit our knowledge of Jewish residence patterns and history in the area and Jewish-related events that took place there? Another indication is the inclusion of objects with explicitly Jewish uses, iconography, or inscriptions. Thus, for example, the treasure troves found in Weißenfels (1823-26), Colmar (1863), and Erfurt (1998) were identified as Jewish based on wedding rings bearing the Hebrew

2 Michael Toch, "Medieval Treasure Troves and Jews," in *Laudem Hierosolymitani: Studies in Crusades and Medieval Culture in Honour of Benjamin Z. Kedar*, eds. Iris Shagrir, Ronnie Ellenbaum, and Jonathan Riley-Smith (Aldershot: Ashgate 2007), 273–96.

inscription "mazal tov" (figs. 1-3).[3] Another treasure trove attributed to Jews was discovered in Kuttenberg (1968), today Kutná Hora in the Czech Republic. The inventory of this trove consisted of coins and tableware. Two of five virtually identical silver goblets included Jewish features: one bore a Hebrew inscription of the name "Ze'ev" and the other a coat of arms consisting of three contemporary "Jewish-huts"(*Judenhuts*) on a shield.[4]

These treasure troves, as well as other troves attributed to Jewish owners, often contain a mix of identifiably Jewish and Christian artifacts, suggesting that they belonged to Jewish merchants or pawnbrokers. Moreover, their composition implies that these pawnbrokers preserved little distinction between their own private property and items taken as security for loans. One must note that the capital they accumulated was partly invested in their business and had no separate physical existence beyond the business itself. Some of this capital, however, was nonetheless maintained in the form of coins, ingots, and other valuables – objects that could be moved from place to place with relative ease, but could also be stolen or looted.

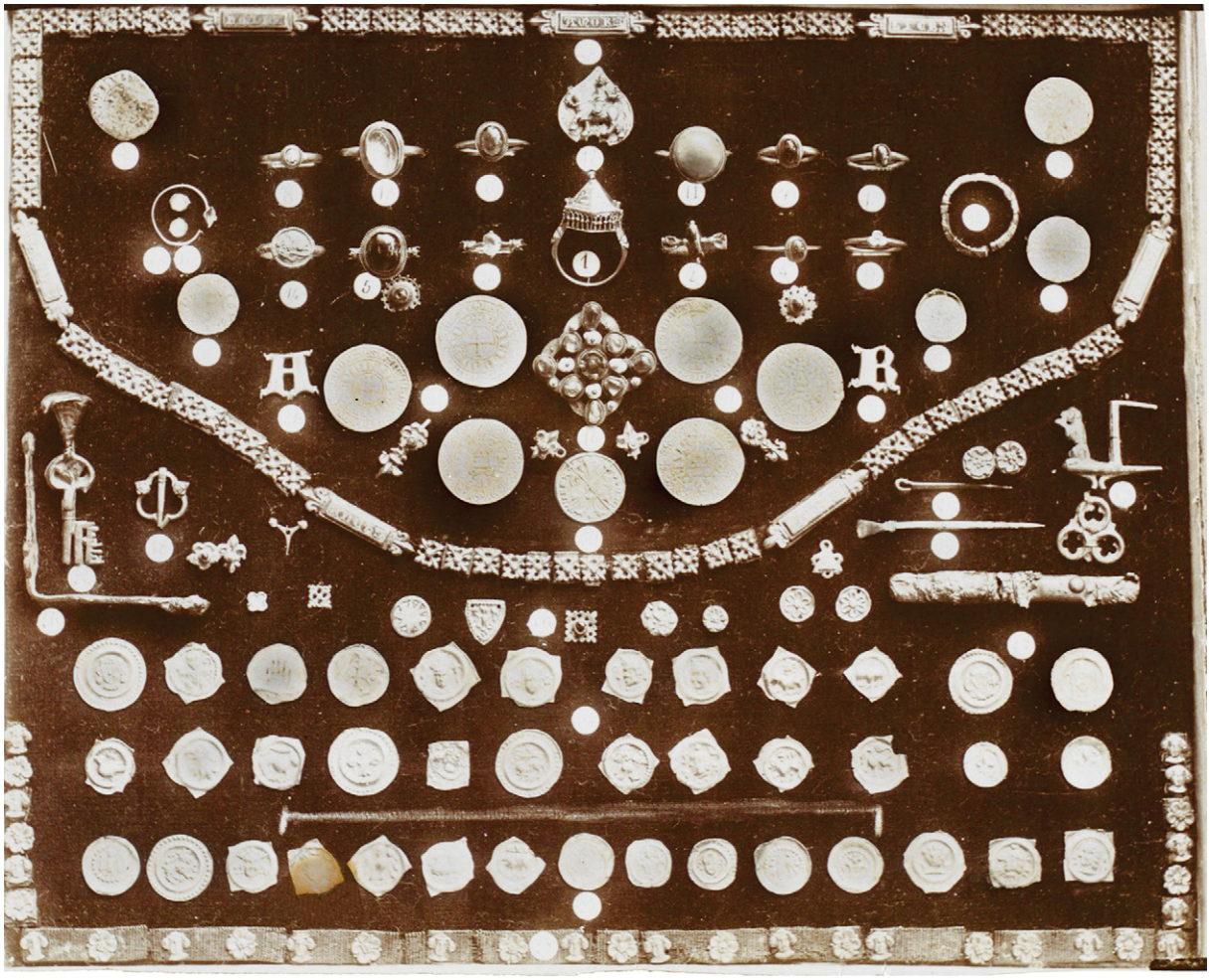

Fig. 2. Miscellany of jewelry and coins, part of the Colmar Treasure, discovered in 1863 in the Jewish Quarter of Colmar, France. Hidden not before 1342. Paris, Musée De Cluny – Musée national Du Moyen Âge. Photo © Rmn-Grand Palais. Musée De Cluny – Musée national Du Moyen-Âge.

3 See note 5 in my "The Mazal Tov Ring and the Ketubbah" in this catalogue.

4 Nürnberg, Germanische Nationalmuseum, inventory number: HG 11628.

Fig. 3. Miscellany of jewelry, tableware, coins and ingots, part of the Erfurt Treasure, discovered in 1998 in the Jewish Quarter of Erfurt, Germany. Hidden before 1348/9. Courtesy of the Thuringian State Office for Heritage Management and Archaeology. Photograph by Brigitte Stefan.

We should not be surprised by the fact that the "enemy" (including that certain priest who requested Isaac to recover the treasure with him) did not find the treasure that was hidden in the cellar. Historical and archaeological evidence from this period reveals that Jews hid valuables in a variety of places, some quite creative: inside chests and locked rooms, in the interiors of walls, under beds, inside chimneys, and in underground basements. Such valuables were only meant to be hidden for a limited time, as the owner intended to use the property again in the future. The concealment of valuables for longer periods of time was planned in advance, and tended to make use of prepared hiding places which could hold a large number of sizable and/or heavy objects. In contrast, items were often hidden for the short-term in casual, accessible locations, enabling the owner to retrieve them quickly.

There are a number of possible reasons why Jews, including David the Parnas, felt the need to hide their belongings. Possessions were routinely hidden in order to protect them from thieves. In the absence of an institution responsible for the maintenance and storage of private property, such as a bank, each owner was forced to protect his or her own private and commercial property. However, it is likely that there were also less conventional reasons for hiding property. Family disputes, especially regarding the distribution of property and finances, could motivate people to conceal their assets. Property owners may also have hidden their wealth in order to avoid paying taxes, not only to Christian authorities, but also to the Jewish community. Another reason for the hiding of valuables in the Middle Ages, at least in Jewish communities, was anxiety associated with violent outbreaks by Christians, which not only endangered lives but also came

hand-in-hand with looting and economic uncertainty. Whatever the reason for initially concealing the property, the abandonment of these objects suggests that their owners (whether Jewish or Christian) met with some catastrophe that prevented them from returning to retrieve their property.

David the Parnas is an example of such a case – a person prevented by dire circumstances from claiming his belongings. Moreover, had his son Isaac the Pious not known where his father had hidden the possessions, they might not have been discovered at that time or at all. Many historical sources indicate that this example is one of many. During the Middle Ages, European Jews were subject to continuous persecution during which individuals, families, and sometimes entire communities were exiled or perished, leaving no one to retrieve their property. The notion that the Jews had hidden and abandoned their assets motivated people from the surrounding areas to begin searching for valuables in places where Jews had lived. Many treasures were surely retrieved in the Middle Ages, while some were left untouched until recent times.

Most treasure troves discovered over the past two hundred years can be attributed to one of history's most traumatic events for Europe in general and European Jews in particular – the outbreak of the Black Death between 1347 and 1352. The epidemic eradicated one-third of Europe's population. Jews died of the plague no less frequently than their Christian neighbors; at the same time, many were killed in riots that broke out after Jews were accused of deliberately poisoning water sources and causing the epidemic. After the Plague, the survivors, Jews as well as Christians, conducted extensive searches for hidden Jewish property. One instance among many is documented in Speyer 1349, when the city council blocked access to the Jewish area and demanded exclusive rights to any money and valuables found there.[5] During that year, searches for Jewish property were also conducted in Erfurt and objects worth a total of 3410 marks were found and sold.[6]

The story about R. David the Parnas and Isaac the Pious sheds light on two contradictory (or complementary) phenomena that were part of the daily lives of Jews in the Middle Ages: on the one hand the routaine hiding of valuables, and on the other, attempts to unearth them. For scholars interested in medieval Jewish history, such treasure troves are worth more than any specific object found within them. Each trove holds valuable historical information about the original owner, as well as the time, place, and circumstances of the deposit. Additionally, the troves sometimes contain information about the circumstances that prevented these owners from returning to retrieve their property.

5 Zvi Avneri, "Speyer," *Germania Judaica: Von 1238 bis zur Mitte des 14. Jahrhunderts* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1968), 2:779.

6 Toch, "Medieval Treasure Troves and Jews."

Further Reading

- Christine Descatoire, ed., *Treasures of the Black Death. Exhibition Catalogue.* London: Wallace Collection, 2009.
- Anke K. Scholz, "Pest – Pogrome – Pfandleiherhorte: Ein standardisiertes Deutungsschema für spätmittelalterliche Schatzfunde," *Archäologischer Kontext und soziale Interpretation. Mitteilungen der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Archäologie des Mittelalters und der Neuzeit* 25 (2013): 189–202.
- Maria Stürzebecher, "Der Schatzfund aus der Michaelisstraße in Erfurt." In *Die mittelalterliche jüdische Kultur in Erfurt*. vol. 1: Der Schatzfund, Archäologie – Kunstgeschichte – Siedlungsgeschichte, edited by Sven Ostritz, 158–189. Weimar: Thüringische Landesamt für Denkmalpflege und Archäologie, 2010.
- Michael Toch, "Medieval Treasure Troves and Jews." In *Laudem Hierosolymitani: Studies in Crusades and Medieval Culture in Honour of Benjamin Z. Kedar*, edited by Iris Shagrir, Ronnie Ellenblum, and Jonathan Riley-Smith, 273–96. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007.