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Medieval Ashkenaz: Views from the 21st Century*

Abstract: Examining a selection of modern urban spaces, this article describes how the history of medieval Ashkenazi Jewry is displayed in Germany today, as well as who displays it and for whom. The preoccupation of Germany with its Jewish past is not trivial; it is an institutionalized trend designed not only to teach the public about local medieval history, but also to educate it to re-include medieval Jews into its history.

Key words: Jewish museums, museology, Jewish art, memorials, heritage, Holocaust, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*.

Introduction

On Highway 71 north near Erfurt, Germany, a tourist information board of particular to visitors who are interested medieval Jewish history shows a drawing of the west façade of the Old Synagogue in Erfurt and a drawing of a wedding ring, part of the Erfurt Treasure, a hoard hidden by a Jew during the Black Death (Pl. 10a, p. 460). The very existence of such a sign raises questions: who placed it there and when? Whom is it meant for? What message is it meant to convey? In addition, one must ask how and why medieval Jewish history has become an important feature of Erfurt, as well as of other contemporary German cities.

In an effort to discover what can be learned when visiting the urban spaces in which medieval German history actually took place, this article examines not only surviving archaeological remains, but also varieties of heritage interpretation used by Jewish museums and civic culture authorities to impart information about this subject, whether material, visual, textual or sub-textual; these include, *inter alia*, road and street signs, memorial and informative plaques, maps, memorial monuments, statues, exhibitions, etc.

The article describes and analyzes the overall means used to mediate and convey medieval Jewish history in five cities – Erfurt, Trier, Worms, Speyer

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