



# Jews Sailing on the Rivers

Tzafrir Barzilay

[About] Reuben and Simeon, who happened to be in one city. Reuben had a ship loaded with salted fish, which [he planned] to sail with to another city [in order to sell the fish]. And he came across Simeon, who wished to load another ship with fish and also sail to the same city [to sell the fish]. [So Reuben] told [Simeon]: "what do you want now with fish? I have a ship loaded with them. I will save for you [from my ship] a certain amount, worth so and so marks, and you should go to the same marketplace, and buy there [other] commodities worth the same amount of money as I gave you in fish. And I will sell the fish, and you will sell whatever [commodities] you bring [buy], and when we meet again, each of us will receive back his expenses, and we will divide the profits." And so they did.<sup>1</sup>

Meir son of Barukh, *Responsa*, Germany, thirteenth century

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<sup>1</sup> Meir son of Barukh of Rothenburg, *Maharam's Responsa* (Prague edition), ed. Moses Arye Blakh (Budapest, 1895), §898.



Fig. 1. Cologne and its Rhine river port. Woodcut by Michel Wolgemut and Wilhelm Pleydenwurff in the Nürnberg chronicle. Hartmann Schedel, *Liber chronicarum*. Nürnberg, 1493, fols. 90v-91r. Public Domain.

The passage above is excerpted from a responsum sent to a German scholar, perhaps R. Meir of Rothenburg or one of his students, in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century. It describes a business partnership between two Jews, Reuben and Simeon (both stock names), who wish to bring commodities from one city to another, the second city being a major marketplace. The aim of the agreement was to prevent direct competition between the two Jewish merchants, and ensure that they made the most out of their business trip. In addition to issues of trade and economic activity, this passage reveals another major aspect of Jewish life: travel along the rivers (figs. 1-2). The aforementioned exchange was most likely a sailing operation along the Rhine, one of Europe's major rivers. Reuben easily convinces Simeon to switch his operation from importing fish from one city to another to trade in other goods. Thus, it seems that these traders were not interested in a particular commodity, but in profiting from the differences in prices of different commodities in different markets. The river, which allowed for the fast and cheap transfer of large amounts of goods, made this kind of operation possible.

But rivers were more than just trade routes. They permitted quick communication and travel between the towns and cities located on their banks, as sailing was much easier, safer, and cheaper than traveling over land. One can say that the major rivers served as a network of "highways" in the Middle Ages, and it is no coincidence that many of the major cities of inland Europe were built on the banks of these rivers. Jews were drawn to these major urban centers and used the rivers to develop their businesses and connections between the different communities. In Germany, the Jewish centers of Mainz, Speyer, and Worms (the "ShUM" communities) were established on the Rhine, and while they were known for being centers of rabbinic learning, they also served as commercial hubs. These cities were linked to older Jewish communities via rivers like the Rhine and the Mosel. During the early stages of Jewish settlement, these isolated communities, dispersed through the vast lands of the German Empire, could have hardly existed without this connection.<sup>2</sup>

2 For the geographical development of the Jewish settlement in the German Empire, see maps in *Geschichte der Juden im Mittelalter von der Nordsee bis zu den Südalpen*, ed. Alfred Haverkamp (Hannover: Hahn, 2002).



Fig. 2. A River Ship - Second Nürnberg Haggadah, Franconia, 1470-80. Courtesy of David Sofer Collection, London, fol. 41. Photograph by Shalom Sabar.

In north-eastern France, Jews used the Seine and its tributaries to maintain regular contact with the Jews of England. R. Barukh son of Isaac, who lived in the area in the twelfth century, mentions that "to pass the sea to the island called England usually takes [the ships] one day, if the wind is good."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Barukh son of Isaac, *Sefer haTerumah* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Institute, 1979), 133, §225. Also cited in R. Simhah son of Shmuel of Vitry, *Mahzor Vitry*, ed. Simon Hurwitz (Nürnberg: J. Bulka, 1923), 126.

The rivers enabled Jewish scholars from northern France to study in the rabbinic centers of the southern Rhineland (and vice versa), with R. Solomon son of Isaac of Troyes, known as Rashi, being the most famous example. They made it possible for Jews from different cities, many miles apart, to conduct business with each other, to marry each other, and to establish common institutions. The fact that many of the communities of northern Europe had overlapping regulations or similar liturgy and structural organization stemmed to a significant degree from their geographical location. For example, in Solomon son of Samson's chronicle, the author wrote about the community of Cologne in the mid-twelfth century, stating that "from that place [Cologne] came life, and food, and common judgment to our brethren scattered in distant locations."<sup>4</sup> While Cologne was not known as a rabbinic center, its location at a strategic point on the Rhine, where the river becomes shallower, made it an important place. Sea-faring ships coming from the northern sea could not continue sailing south up the Rhine and had to unload their cargo in Cologne. Any cargo destined to continue southwards had to be reloaded to river-faring ships or boats (see fig. 1).<sup>5</sup> This made Cologne into an important economic center and home to a bustling marketplace. Solomon son of Samson asserted that while the rabbinic heartland of Germany was established further down the Rhine, in the early twelfth century its economic and administrative center was located in Cologne. The two centers supported each other, a connection which the convenient travel along the Rhine made possible.<sup>6</sup>

As the Jewish settlement in Germany gradually expanded eastward, other rivers started to play a more important role in Jewish life. Europe enjoyed prosperity over the course of the thirteenth century, its economy expanding tenfold. Jews, many of whom were traders, craftsmen, and businessmen, enjoyed this trend and their communities grew larger and richer. Jews (and Christians) started traveling eastwards, to inhabit the lands available there. As in the west, major rivers helped to support the new settlements, and cities along their banks flourished. The Jewish centers of Würzburg (on the river Main), Nürnberg (on the river Pegnitz, a tributary of the Main), and Regensburg (on the river Danube) started to grow in economic and cultural importance during this period.<sup>7</sup> They kept their ties with the older Jewish centers as people travelled back and forth along the Main and the Danube.

Jews would sail with their goods along the Rhine, and such trips are discussed in a matter-of-fact tone in the passage cited above. Still, travel raised a host of halakhic questions. The thirteenth-century German rabbi Eliezer son of Joel haLevi of Bonn, known as Ra'aviah, referred to this reality in his halakhic writings. Could a Jew leave a ship on which he traveled when it arrived at its destination during the Sabbath, and under what circumstances could Jews partake of foodstuffs brought on board at such a time? If a Jew died aboard a ship on the Sabbath, could the body be removed on the same day?<sup>8</sup> As we can see, river travel was common for thirteenth-century Jews, although such travel entailed significant halakhic challenges. These challenges were amplified by the fact that Jews traveled on ships owned and operated mainly by Christians. Few European Jews were sailors, though some were ship owners or users. Every ship that Jews boarded was thus a place of close contact between them and Christians. Notably, Ra'aviah, who was well aware of this reality, did not suggest that Jews avoid traveling with Christians.

4 Eva A. Haverkamp, ed., *Hebräische Berichte über die Judenverfolgungen während des Ersten Kreuzzugs* (Hannover: Hahn, 2005), 400–401.

5 Hartmann Schedel, *Liber Chronicarum* (Nürnberg, 1493) ff. 90–91.

6 For one such traveling venture, from Cologne up the Rhine, that went astray: Ephraim of Bonn, *Sefer Zekhirah*, ed. Abraham M. Habermann (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1970), 34.

7 See maps in Haverkamp, ed. *Geschichte der Juden*.

8 Eliezer son of Yoel haLevi of Bonn (Ra'aviah), *Sefer Ra'aviah*, ed. Victor Aptowitz, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Jerusalem: Harry Fischel Institute, 1963), 1: 414, 417-21, 424-26, 428, §385-390. See also Barukh son of Isaac, *Sefer haTerumah*, 132–133, §224-25.

The written and visual sources that have survived from medieval Europe are mostly silent about Jewish travel. Yet, we know that Jews, who tended to be urban and engage in trade, moved around quite a bit. Our sources do mention scholars seeking the advice of their teachers who lived many miles away, merchandise being transferred quickly from one marketplace to another, and family ties established despite the distance between different communities. Considering the location of these communities through the vast lands of northern Europe and the difficulties of medieval transportation, it is clear that river travel played a major role in facilitating these everyday connections.

## Further Reading

- ❖ Alfred Haverkamp, "Jews and Urban Life: Bonds and Relationships," *The Jews of Europe in the Middle Age: Tenth to Fifteenth Centuries*, edited by Christoph Cluse, 55–69. Turnhout: Brepols, 2004.
- ❖ Martha C. Howell, *Commerce before Capitalism in Europe, 1300*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- ❖ Jonathan Romain, "River Jews: Medieval Jews along the Thames as a Microcosm of Anglo-Jewry," *Jewish Historical Studies* 43 (2011): 21–42.
- ❖ Michael Toch, *The Economic History of European Jews: Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012.
- ❖ Jean Verdon, *Travel in the Middle Ages*, translated by George Holoch. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003.