Why Did Medieval Northern French Jewry (Ṣarfat) Disappear?

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“I am so easily assimilated.”

“The ultimate question concerns the willingness and ability of individuals to recognize themselves and to survive as a group.”

We often assume that only two European Jewish subcultures out of many survived into modern times. We call the Jews formerly from central Europe and Iberia Ashkenazi and Sefaradi respectively. This essay explores the history of the third major medieval Jewish community that was forced to emigrate, the Jews of royal France (Ṣarfat).

What has hardly been noticed, let alone explained, is that despite being about the same size as the Iberian Jews in 1492, approximately 100,000 strong, northern French Jews seem to have melted away into other nearby diasporas when they were forced to leave royal France in 1306. They resettled in lands

3 How this came about in modern Jewish historiography deserves further investigation. For now, see Heinrich Graetz, A Popular History of the Jews, 6 vols. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1891–98), 4:421: “As the Spanish Jews turned portions of European and Asiatic Turkey into a new Spain, the German Jews transformed Poland, Lithuania, and the territories belonging thereto, into a new Germany. For several centuries, therefore, the Jews were divided into Spanish and German speaking Jews….” (my emphasis). This reductionist reading of late medieval and modern Jewish history as consisting of two primary diaspora cultures seems to be a consequence of the Sephardic mystique. See Ivan G. Marcus, “Beyond the Sephardic Mystique,” Orim 11 (1985): 35–53, and Ismar Schorsch, “The Myth of Sephardic Supremacy,” Leo Baeck Yearbook 34 (1989): 47–66. Graetz needed medieval Iberian Jewry as his model in his pro-emancipation argument from Jewish history. Everything else, including French Jewry, let alone Asian and African Jewries, was irrelevant.
that form a crescent from the northern European lowlands in the north to Catalonia in the south. Unlike the Jewries of Iberia and the German Empire, the Jews of royal France did not continue to exist as a distinctive diaspora community down to modern times.

Like some emigré Jews from German lands who incorporated “Ashkenazi” into their names, or Maimonides, a former Iberian Jew who identified himself as “ha-Sefaradi,” several notable individuals, mainly rabbis, continued to refer to themselves using “ha-Ṣarfati” as part of their name. But unlike these individual


7 For “Ashkenazi,” see, for example, R. Bezalel b. Avraham Ashkenazi (sixteenth-century Palestine); for Maimonides as “Sefaradi,” see his autobiographical comment at the end of his commentary to the Mishnah, Mishnah ‘im perush Moshe ben Maimon, ed. Yosef Qafih (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1976–78), vol. 3 (end). For “ha-Ṣarfati,” see, for example,