Devotion to holy places is a familiar feature both of Christianity and Islam not only during the Middle Ages but even down to and in modern times. What is less well known is the existence of a comparable devotion in Judaism, which also persists among oriental Jews to the present day. It has a long history to be sure, but it is best known during that period in which east and west were fighting one another for control of the best known of all holy places and for the Holy City itself, that is, in the twelfth century.

While crusading armies of the west were fighting their long drawn out and losing battle, two pious Jews were quietly visiting certain holy places that exercised a peculiar claim upon the attention of Jews, most of them further east than the battle grounds of the Crusades. They traveled independently and no doubt were not by any means the only Jews who undertook such excursions. The outstanding value of the pilgrimages of Benjamin of Tudela and Petachia of Regensburg lies in the fact that each was recorded. These two travelers left behind independent accounts of what they did, where they went, and what they saw, and in those accounts, which corroborate each other to a certain extent, evidence is found of a remarkably well developed Jewish cult of holy places.

For the most part, though not exclusively, the holy sites in question are burial places: significant graves both in the Holy Land and elsewhere, tombs of people who had played a major role in almost any phase of Jewish history. Many of these graves were regarded as places of miraculous cures; some of them were the focal point around which legends accumulated; and some had synagogues constructed over or in conjunction with them. In these and other lesser respects, they closely resembled the Christian martyra.

Yet graves were by no means the only holy places that attracted the devotion of the pious Jew. There were also certain archaeological monuments that, if not strictly speaking holy, were certainly of special significance. Benjamin of Tudela noted a number of these in the
ancient city of Rome. Such, for instance, was the so-called Palace of Titus outside the city, for it was here that Titus was allegedly reproved for having failed to take Jerusalem after three years of fighting. Benjamin echoes the pride of the local Jewish community in keeping this legend alive. He states:

In the Church of Saint John in the Lateran there are two bronze columns taken from the Temple, the handiwork of King Solomon, each column being engraved “Solomon the son of David.” The Jews of Rome told me that every year upon the 9 day of Ab they found the columns exuding moisture like water. There also is the cave where Titus the son of Vespasian stored the Temple vessels which he brought from Jerusalem. There is also a cave in a hill...where are the graves of ten martyrs. In front of Saint John in the Lateran there are statues of Samson in marble with a spear in his hand, and of Absalom, the son of King David, and another of Constantine the Great.... The last named statue is of bronze, the horse being overlaid with gold.

Benjamin does not appear actually to have seen the columns that wept on the anniversary of the destruction the Temple, but the three statues are well attested in other medieval sources. For obvious reasons, the first two of these would assume particular importance in local Jewish folklore, and Benjamin indicates that these were by no means the only monuments the Jews of Rome invested with a peculiar significance. They told him, for instance, that Pozzuoli, “Sorrento the Great,” was built by Zur, son of Hadadezer, “when he fled in fear of King David,” and that it was fear of King David and of Joab that led Romulus to construct the fortification of the city.

What seems to have happened is that the Jews of Rome had evolved an imaginary Jewish world for themselves in their exile; Italy had become, as it were, a fantasy Palestine, providing them with that which they lacked, a strong sense of continuity with their past and with their homeland. Something of the same kind of identification can be detected in other instances elsewhere, in Spain, for instance,