Jews in the Netherlands: a Short History

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Translated from the Dutch by Liz Waters

Cover illustration: View of the Great Synagogue and the Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam, c.1680, Gerrit Adriaenszoon Berckheyde. Collection of the Jewish Museum Amsterdam: M 011075.

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Contents

Introduction by the authors

Is it possible to describe in brief the essential elements of the history of the Jews in the Netherlands? Most people know little more than fragments of Dutch Jewish history: the Portuguese Jews of Amsterdam; Jewish socialism; the devastating years of the Second World War. So where is the storyline? What happened to the Jews in the Netherlands from the moment they first settled there permanently? This book aims to present the main points of 700 years of Dutch Jewish history as a concise, continuous narrative. Many specialist studies and bulky textbooks have of course been written about the history of Jews in the Netherlands, but few of us get around to reading them. A succinct and accessible introduction to the main events has been lacking up to now. Our aim is to bring as many people as possible into contact, in a manner that makes it accessible, with the gripping and sometimes painful story of Jewish life in the Netherlands. We describe how a rapidly evolving Jewish minority succeeded in living, or sometimes merely surviving, in a Dutch society that was changing no less rapidly.

We have chosen to distil that story into a hundred entries that, taken together, present a balanced, representative picture of Dutch Jewish history. Each relates to a central event, place, person or object that helps to explain one important aspect. Each has a short text of around four hundred words, accompanied by a striking, iconic image. They are grouped by century around unifying themes that make them part of an ongoing story.

The narrative takes us from the Middle Ages to the twenty-first century, with attention paid to politics, economics, culture and religion, to important rabbis but also to the typical Jewish pedlar or to antisemitism in the Netherlands. The selection has been made in such a way that both well-known and little-known aspects of the past are brought to the fore. It includes both high points and low points. This book is not intended to be the last word on the subject or to give definitive answers. Our pretentions are limited in that respect; we could have opted for countless other places or events, and not everything fitted into the format of one hundred entries. But we intend it to be a resource that will give everybody the opportunity to gain a clear overall view, a starting point from which any reader can set out to find their own way through the story of the Jews in the Netherlands.

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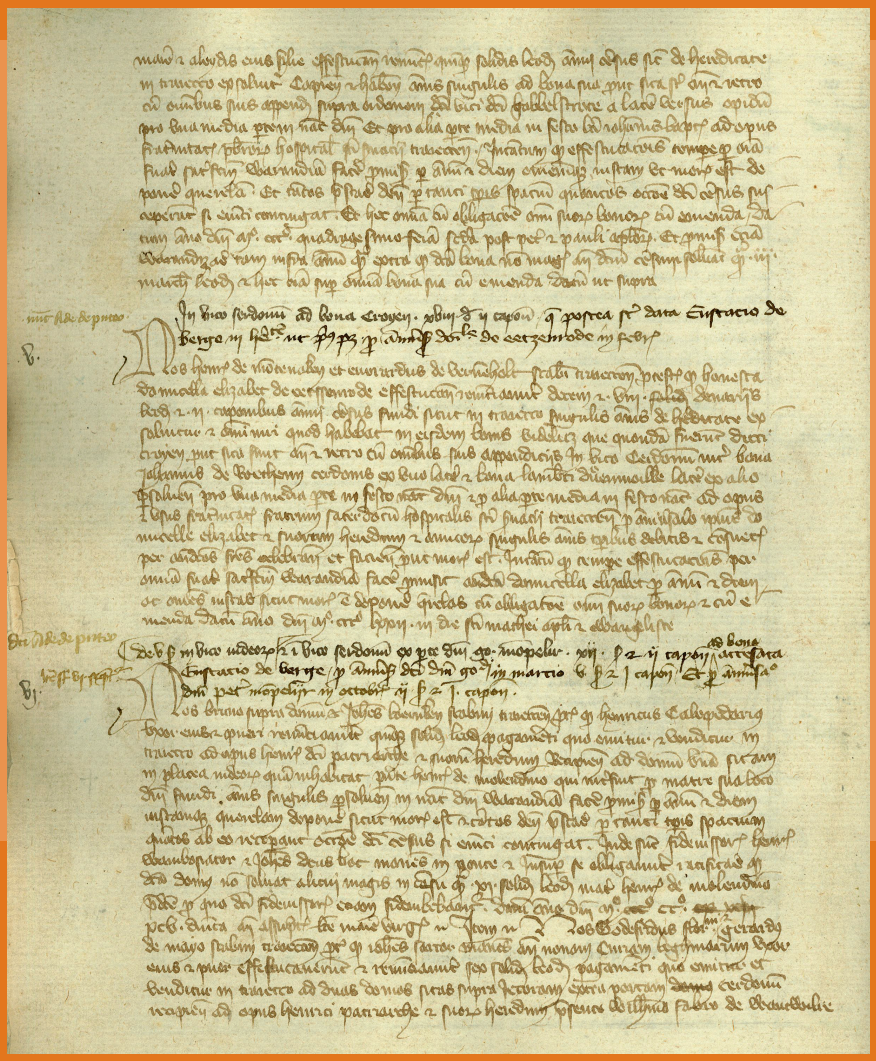
1295

Middle Ages: Jodenstraat in Maastricht



The street known as the Jodenstraat or 'platea judaeorum' in Maastricht was first mentioned in an alderman's document of 1295.

Collection of the Historisch Centrum Limburg, Maastricht: 14 B002 H, inv. no. 4, folio 43v. Broederschap der kapelanen Sint Servaas, Cartularium 1300–1469.

The Jodenstraat ('Jew Street') in Maastricht is one of the oldest streets in the city, in a small Jewish district that includes a synagogue and a Jewish school founded in about 1295. It represents clear evidence that Jewish people lived in the Low Countries during the Middle Ages. They settled here over the course of the thirteenth century and it is not hard to guess why, since the Jews were driven out of England in 1290 and out of France in 1306. In the south of what is now the Netherlands, and in some of its eastern regions, Jews found places where they believed they could settle permanently. All were on important trade routes. As well as Maastricht, we see Jews taking up residence in the same period in Diepenheim, Goor, Oldenzaal, Zwolle, Nijmegen, Doesburg, Zutphen and Roermond. They were mainly engaged in banking and moneylending. Jews in Gelderland enjoyed the protection of their duke, based on their status as servants (*servi*) of the sovereign. As a quid pro quo, the duke could impose taxes on them.

The Black Death that held western Europe in its grip from 1348 onwards put an end to the Jewish presence in those disparate towns. Jews were seen as enemies of the Church and the Christian community, and accused of being behind the outbreak of plague. They were said to have poisoned the wells. In the German territories and the southern Low Countries, Jews were burned, drowned and murdered in retaliation. As the death and devastation spread further north, Jews in Zwolle, Utrecht, Broek, Nijmegen, Zutphen, Deventer and Kampen were targeted by angry crowds, and for the time being, Jewish life ceased in the medieval towns of the northern Netherlands.

The situation soon changed, however. From 1368 onwards we again come upon Jews, in Nijmegen and Roermond, and later in Zwolle and Venlo. In the first half of the fifteenth century, Nijmegen developed into the most important Jewish centre in the region, with its own meat market, ritual baths and cemetery. Venlo, 's-Hertogenbosch and Doesburg now each had their own Jodenstraat. Persecutions in the neighbouring German territories were probably in part a response to the immigration of Jews to these regions. Here too anti-Jewish measures made the situation increasingly unfavourable, especially since Jews were forced to wear a distinguishing mark. Accusations of usury made it more and more difficult for them to work in financial services, their most important source of income. Faced with increasing tensions, the Jews turned their backs on the Low Countries and in the sixteenth century they were no longer welcome. The initiative that led to a revival of settlement came from a quite different and unexpected direction.

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1600

Seventeenth century: the century of 'New Jews'

View of the Great Synagogue and the Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam, c.1680, Gerrit Adriaenszoon Berckheyde.

Collection of the Jewish Museum Amsterdam: M 011075.

Whereas in the late Middle Ages it had been increasingly hard for Jews to settle permanently in the Low Countries, in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries the Jewish presence grew once more. First to arrive were Spanish and Portuguese 'New Christians' or 'Conversos', who came from the Iberian Peninsula. Many now reverted to the original faith of ancestors who had converted to Christianity, whether of their own free will or under duress, from the end of the fourteenth century onwards. They thereby became 'New Jews'. Out of nowhere, these Spanish and Portuguese Jews, who also became known as Sephardim, established a congregation, in theory intended only for members of the Spanish-Portuguese Jewish nation (*a nação* or *la nación*). Not long after, from the German territories, central Europe and Poland came High German and Polish Jews, known as Ashkenazim. It was the start of more than four centuries of continuous Jewish presence in the Republic of the Seven United Provinces and in the state that eventually became the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Both groups regarded the young Dutch Republic as an attractive destination, now that it had won its freedom from Spanish Catholic hegemony in a war of independence. The new state had set down freedom of conscience in what it regarded as a constitution, and Amsterdam was developing into a global trading centre that offered great economic opportunities to new migrants.

The Dutch Republic had no experience in regulating the Jewish presence in its midst. The States of Holland and West Friesland took the initiative by developing a body of Jewish Regulations (*Jodenreglement*), but these were not put into practice. In the end, the towns and villages in that part of the country had to decide for themselves what the rules should be, although they were not permitted to force Jews to wear something to mark themselves out as Jewish. Other Dutch provinces followed, until every town and region had developed a series of statutes and a policy of its own. Some welcomed Jews on certain conditions, while others banned them from their territories. This reflects the medieval concept of the nation, according to which the legal position of ethnic minorities was regulated. Jews were responsible for their internal organization, including poor relief, education, care for the sick, and the maintenance of peace and order within their ranks. They could, however, rely on the support and protection of the authorities without a collective tax being imposed on them.

The distinction between the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds was less sharply defined than such regulations suggest. Nowhere was there a ghetto. Jews and Christians met as neighbours, and increasingly in the worlds of trade and industry, scholarship and culture. True, anti-Jewish sentiments could sometimes be found on the Christian side, but above all there was enormous admiration for and interest in Jewish culture.

The Dutch Golden Age, roughly from 1588 to 1672, was a period when the Netherlands flourished in the religious, economic, cultural and social spheres, and its success benefitted all those living in the Dutch Republic, Jew and non-Jew alike. It was also a turbulent period of wars and epidemics, and the furore surrounding the arrival of the mystical messiah Sabbatai Zevi made the period even more deeply troubling for Jews. The Sephardi and Ashkenazi synagogues, built on the Muidergracht in Amsterdam in the 1670s, nevertheless attest to a triumph of stability and faith in the future.

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