

THE JEWS OF CAIRO

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During the Geniza period, the Jews of Cairo has a surprising amount of autonomy from the Muslim overlords of the city, especially in the realms of religion, law and daily affairs. A Jew could marry, gain an education, worship and plead cases in court without approaching a non-Jew. However, the lives of the Cairene Jews intertwined with those of Muslims in other regards, especially in economic affairs, making the Jewish community both separate and a part of the greater city.

The Cairene Jews were able to administer many of their own affairs with little interference from the Muslim authorities. Initially, each congregation within the city, led by a *Haver*, would follow the instructions and legal authority of the *Gaon* of one of the three *yeshivas*.¹ However, the *Gaon* only had authority over the adherents to his particular yeshiva. He had none over other congregations or over the Karaites and Samaritans who followed neither the Babylonian nor the Palestinian rite. Thus, the community split into different groups on at least the religious and legal levels.

From the 11th century, however, a community leader called the *Nagid* had authority over the entire Jewish community within Cairo, including all congregations and minority groups. The Nagid was the link between the Muslim rulers and the Jewish community. He made legal rulings, appointed judges, oversaw marriages and divorces, was responsible for moral order and protected those in need.² It would seem as though the Muslim overlords had given a powerful amount of autonomy to the Jews through this office. However, neither Fatimid nor Ayyubid leaders completely devolved *all* power to the Nagid. Importantly, the Muslim ruler had to approve the Nagid. The Nagid also had to retain the

support of the Muslim authorities in order to retain enough authority to fulfill his duties.³ In many ways, the office of Nagid was not one of power but one of responsibility. He had the duty of keeping law and order amongst the Jews, of ensuring the release of hostages and the paying of the *Jaliya* poll tax.

Although the level of autonomy given to the Nagid might at first seem surprising, we can look at in within the pattern of decentralization seen in the city. In particular, the function of the office of Nagid resembles that of the sheikh of a city quarter as described by Lapidus. Although he was referring to the Mamluk period, decentralization did not begin with the Mamluks and sheikhs or their equivalents must have existed under both the earlier regimes.⁴ This makes the devolution of power and responsibility to a local community leader, even a Jew, less surprising and more part of a standard pattern. The Jewish community was thus one of many communities within the whole.

The delegation of legal power to the Jewish communities must also be seen as part of the Muslim norm. Unlike the Christian West, the administration of civil law was not the responsibility of the Muslim rulers but was the responsibility of the *ulama*, particularly qadis from each of the four schools of law. Muslims and Jews both tied law closely to religion. Given the standing assumption that the Jews be allowed to manage their own religious affairs, it was only natural they should also manage their legal affairs. Nevertheless, the situation was never completely cut and dried, and the Jews could never fully forget that they lived within a Muslim ruled city. Especially in matters of inheritance, Muslim rulers would interfere, attempting to gain property or wealth through

¹ S.D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: An Abridgement in One Volume*, ed. J. Lassner (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) 84

² *Ibid* 86

³ *Ibid* 87

⁴ Ira Lapidus, *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1967), 92

application of Muslim rather than Jewish inheritance rules. Additionally, Jews would occasionally appeal to Muslim legal authority when that authority might treat their case more favorably than Jewish law.⁵ Also, Muslim authorities assumed control of all criminal cases, and severe punishments – including capital punishment – remained the remit of the state.⁶

Like civil law, provision of social services was the responsibility of the Jewish community. The *parnasim* arranged donations from the congregation and the distribution of food and clothing to the poor. Synagogues also ran *funduqs* – hostels – subsidised rents, paid ransoms and helped the needy with the payment of the *jaliya*.⁷ Unlike the individual charity of their Muslim neighbors, who donated to charity through waqfs for specific foundations, Jews viewed charity as a communal affair and funnelled money and aid through their local synagogue. This must have increased the sense of community solidarity and self-sufficiency.

Although the Jewish community was separate from that of the Muslims in legal and religious terms, this was not reflected in a physical separation. Muslims, Jews and Christians lived and worked alongside each other and although there might be a higher concentration of Jews living near a synagogue, there were no ghettos. Indeed, the Geniza notes a Muslim *qadi* living in synagogue owned property.⁸ Neither were Jews excluded from business or from other jobs within the city (except specifically Islamic jobs). They filled many professional positions and during the Fatimid dynasty took many jobs within the government bureaucracy.⁹ In commerce, Jews, Muslims and Christians would often go into partnership together.¹⁰ Jews, therefore, had a fully integrated place within the economy of Cairo. There is also some evidence that Muslims and Jews would meet socially. Goitein

mentions Muslims attending Jewish drinking sessions and also the friendliness between scholars of different faiths.¹¹

Although many aspects of their lives involved none but other Jews, the Jews of Cairo still lived within a city dominated by Muslims. It must have been impossible to ignore that fact. Muslim rulers could interfere in their affairs, especially when it entailed financial gain and the *jaliya* was a constant reminder of their *dhimmi* status. Jews, Muslims and Christians worked and lived alongside each other and Jews took as active a part in the economic and administrative life of the city as any other group. Although it might be tempting to see them as a city apart, this view would ignore the ways in which the Jews contributed to Cairo as a whole. Rather it is more apt to see them as a community among other communities and quarters and groups within this large, varied and cosmopolitan city.

⁵ Goitein 190.

⁶ *Ibid* 318

⁷ *Ibid*, 139

⁸ *Ibid*, 297 and 134

⁹ *Ibid*, 179

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 299.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 215 and 300.