

## Ashkenaz



Ashkenaz is shown in Phrygia in this 1854 map of "The World as known to the Hebrews" (Lyman Coleman, Historical Textbook and Atlas of Biblical Geography)

### *Ashkenaz (From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia)*

Ashkenaz is shown in Phrygia in this 1854 map of "The World as known to the Hebrews" (Lyman Coleman, Historical Textbook and Atlas of Biblical Geography)

Ashkenaz is a term found in a number of contexts. It is found in the Hebrew Bible to refer to one of the descendants of Noah as well as to a reference to a kingdom of Ashkenaz. Ashkenaz is the first son of Gomer, and a Japhetic patriarch in the Table of Nations.

His name is likely a derivation from the Assyrian Aškūza (Aškuzai, Iškuzai), a people who expelled the Cimmerians from the Armenian area of the Upper Euphrates,[1] The Assyrian name is likely based on that of the Scythians. The intrusive n in the Hebrew form of the name has been explained as a scribal mistake confusing a waw װ with a nun ן (i.e. writing אשכנז ašknz for aškūz 4)[3][2].(אשכנז)

The association of the term by medieval Jewry with the geographical area centered on the Rhineland led to the Jewish culture that developed in that area to be called Ashkenazi, the only form that the term is still used today.

## Hebrew Bible

In the genealogies of the Hebrew Bible, Ashkenaz (Hebrew: אֲשְׁכַנַּז *Aškānaz*) was a descendant of Noah. He was the first son of Gomer and brother of Riphath and Togarmah (Genesis 10:3, 1 Chronicles 1:6), with Gomer being the grandson of Noah through Japheth.

According to Jeremiah 51:27, a kingdom of Ashkenaz was called together with Ararat and Minni against Babylon, which reads:

Set ye up a standard in the land, blow the trumpet among the nations, prepare the nations against her [i.e. Babylon], call together against her the kingdoms of Ararat, Minni, and Ashchenaz; appoint a captain against her; cause the horses to come up as the rough caterpillars.

According to the Encyclopaedia Biblica, "Ashkenaz must have been one of the migratory peoples which in the time of Esar-haddon, burst upon the northern provinces of Asia Minor, and upon Armenia. One branch of this great migration appears to have reached Lake Urumiyeh; for in the revolt which Esar-haddon chastised, the Mannai, who lived to the SW of that lake, sought the help of Ispakai 'of the land of Asguza,' a name (originally perhaps Asgunza) which the skepticism of Dillmann need not hinder us from identifying with Ashkenaz, and from considering as that of a horde from the north, of Indo-Germanic origin, which settled on the south of Lake Urumiyeh."

## Medieval reception

### Rabbinic Judaism

In rabbinic literature, the kingdom of Ashkenaz was first associated with the Scythian region, then later with the Slavic territories,[5] and, from the 11th century onwards, with northern Europe and Germany.[6] The region of Ashkenaz was centred on the Rhineland and the Palatinate (notably Worms and Speyer), in what is now the westernmost part of Germany. Its geographic extent did not coincide with the German Christian principalities of the time, and it included northern France.

How the name of Ashkenaz came to be associated in the rabbinic literature with the Rhineland is a subject of speculation.[6]

In rabbinic literature from the 11th century, Ashkenaz was considered the ruler of a kingdom in the North and of the Northern and Germanic people.[citation needed] (See below.)

### Ashkenazi Jews

#### Main article: Ashkenazi Jews

Geneticist Eran Elhaik, a proponent of the minoritarian Khazar hypothesis, believes Ashkenazi Jews to originate from north-east Turkey. According to him, four village names in that region are derived from the word "Ashkenaz": Iskenz (or Eskenaz), Eskenez (or Eskens), Ashanas, and Ashchuz.[7][not in citation given]

Sometime in the early medieval period, the Jews of central and eastern Europe came to be called by the name Ashkenazim,[4] in conformity with the custom of designating areas of Jewish settlement with biblical names, Spain being identified as Sefarad (Obadiah 20), France as Tsarefat (1 Kings 17:9), and Bohemia as Land of Canaan.[8] By the high medieval period, Talmudic commentators like Rashi began to use Ashkenaz/Eretz Ashkenaz to designate Germany, earlier known as Loter,[4][9] where, especially in the Rhineland communities of

Speyer, Worms and Mainz, the most important Jewish communities arose.[10] Rashi uses leshon Ashkenaz (Ashkenazi language) to describe the German language, and Byzantium and Syrian Jewish letters referred to the Crusaders as Ashkenazim.[9] Given the close links between the Jewish communities of France and Germany following the Carolingian unification, the term Ashkenazi came to refer to both the Jews of medieval Germany and France.[11] Ashkenazi Jewish culture later spread into Eastern Europe and then to all parts of the world with the migrations of Ashkenazi Jews.

#### Armenian tradition

In Armenian tradition, Ashkenaz, along with Togarmah, was considered among the ancestors of the Armenians. Koriun, the earliest Armenian historian, calls the Armenians an "Askanazian (ie., Ashkenazi) nation". He starts the "Life of Mashtots" with these words:

"I had been thinking of the God-given alphabet of the Azkanazian nation and of the land of Armenia - when, in what time, and through what kind of man that new divine gift had been bestowed..."[12]

Later Armenian authors concur with this. Hovhannes Draskhanakerttsi (10th century) writes:

"...The sixth son was Tiras from whom were born our very own Ashkenaz [Ask'anaz] and Togarmah [T'orgom] who named the country that he possessed Thrace after himself, as well as Chittim [K'itiim] who brought under his sway the Macedonians. 7. The sons of Tiras were Ashkenaz, from whom descended the Sarmatians, Riphath, whence the Sauromatians [Soramatk'], and Togarmah, who according to Jeremiah subjugated the Ashkenazian army and called it the House of Togarmah; for at first Ashkenaz had named our people after himself in accord with the law of seniority, as we shall explain in its proper place."[13]

Because of this tradition, Askanaz is a male given name still used today by Armenians.

#### German royal genealogy[edit]

In 1498, a monk named Annio da Viterbo published fragments known as "Pseudo-Berosus", now considered a forgery, claiming that Babylonian records had shown that Noah had more than the three sons listed in the Bible. Specifically, Tuiscon or Tuisto is given as the fourth son of Noah, who had been the first ruler of Scythia and Germany following the dispersion of peoples, with him being succeeded by his son Mannus as the second king.

Later historians (e.g. Johannes Aventinus and Johann Hübner) managed to furnish numerous further details, including the assertion by James Anderson in the early 18th century that this Tuiscon was in fact none other than the biblical Ashkenaz, son of Gomer.[14] James Anderson's 1732 tome *Royal genealogies* reports a significant number of antiquarian or mythographic traditions regarding Askenaz as the first king of ancient Germany, for example the following entry:

Askenaz, or Askanes, called by Aventinus Tuisco the Giant, and by others Tuisto or Tuizo (whom Aventinus makes the 4th son of Noah, and that he was born after the flood, but without authority) was sent by Noah into Europe, after the flood 131 years, with 20 Captains, and made a settlement near the Tanais, on the West coast of the Euxin sea (by some called Asken from him) and there founded the kingdom of the Germans and the Sarmatians... when Askenaz himself was 24 years old, for he lived above 200 years, and reigned 176.

In the vocables of Saxony and Hestia, there are some villages of the name Askenaz, and from him the Jews call the Germans Askenaz, but in the Saxon and Italian, they are called Tuiscones, from Tuisco his other name. In the 25th year of his reign, he partitioned the kingdom into Toparchies, Tetrarchies, and Governments, and brought colonies from diverse parts to increase it. He built the city Duisburg, made a body of laws in verse, and invented letters, which Kadmos later imitated, for the Greek and High Dutch are alike in many words.

The 20 captains or dukes that came with Askenaz are: Sarmata, from whom Sarmatia; Dacus or Danus – Dania or Denmark; Geta from whom the Getae; Gotha from whom the Goths; Tibiscus, people on the river Tibiscus; Mocia - Mysia; Phrygus or Brigus - Phrygia; Thynus - Bithynia; Dalmata - Dalmatia; Jader – Jadera Colonia; Albanus from whom Albania; Zavus – the river Save; Pannus – Pannonia; Salon - the town Sale, Azalus – the Azali; Hister – Istria; Adulas, Dietas, Ibalus – people that of old dwelt between the rivers Oenus and Rhenus; Epirus, from whom Epirus.

Askenaz had a brother called Scythia (say the Germans) the father of the Scythians, for which the Germans have of old been called Scythians too (very justly, for they came mostly from old Scythia) and Germany had several ancient names; for that part next to the Euxin was called Scythia, and the country of the Getes, but the parts east of the Vistule or Weysel were called Sarmatia Europaea, and westward it was called Gallia, Celtica, Allemania, Francia and Teutonia; for old Germany comprehended the greater part of Europe; and those called Gauls were all old Germans; who by ancient authors were called Celts, Gauls and Galatians, which is confirmed by the historians Strabo and Aventinus, and by Alstedius in his Chronology, p. 201 etc. Askenaz, or Tuisco, after his death, was worshipped as the ambassador and interpreter of the gods, and from thence called the first German Mercury, from Tuitseben to interpret.[14]

In the 19th century, German theologian, August Wilhelm Knobel, again equated Ashkenaz with the Germans deriving the name of the Aesir from Ashkenaz.[15]

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## The Origins of Ashkenaz

By Philologos July 1, 2008

I Schindler of Bethesda, Md., writes:

“Paul Kriwaczek tells us in his book ‘In Search of Zarathustra: Across Iran and Central Asia To Find the World’s First Prophet’ that the Hebrew word ashkenazi originally meant a Scythian. I myself always thought it meant a German. Did ancient Hebrew speakers use one term to describe all the barbarians beyond the Danube, or did they actually distinguish between Goths and Scythians?”

The place name Ashkenaz occurs three times in the Bible: In Genesis 10:3, in I Chronicles 1:6 and in Jeremiah 51:27. The first three verses of the 10th chapter of Genesis read:

“Now these are the generations of the sons of Noah, Shem, Ham, and Yefet: and unto them were sons born after the Flood. The sons of Yefet: Gomer, and Magog, and Madai, and Yavan, and Tuval, and Meshech, and Tiras. And the sons of Gomer: Ashkenaz and Rifat and Togarmah.”

The Bible represents Shem, Ham and Yefet as the ancestors of the three great ethnic-and-linguistic families of man known to the ancient Hebrews: the Semitic, the Hamitic or African, and the Indo-European. Yefet, the supposed progenitor of the Indo-Europeans, may derive, modern scholars believe, from the figure of Iapetos, the son of Uranus and father of Prometheus in Greek mythology. Of his seven sons, Gomer can be identified with the inhabitants of Asia Minor known to the ancient Assyrians as the Gimmiraya and to the Greeks as the Kymroi or Cimmerians; Madai with the Medes, a people akin to the Persians who lived in what is today western Iran; Yavan with the Ionians or Greeks. Magog, Tuval, Meshech and Tiras can be identified with, respectively, the seventh-century BCE King Gyges of Lydia in southwest Turkey and with two peoples known to the Assyrians as the Tabal and the Musku, and to the Greeks as the Tibaroi and the Moschoi, living along the southern shore of the Black Sea, and as the Tyrsenoi, as the ancient Greeks called the Etruscans.

As for Ashkenaz, it is almost certainly the Hebrew name of the land of the people known to the Assyrians as the Ishkuza and to the Greeks as the Skythoi or Scythians. The Scythians were a powerful confederation of Indo-European tribes who spoke a language of the Iranian family; their original home was the steppe-lands north of the Black Sea, in what today would be southern Ukraine, from where, in the mid-first millennium BCE, their armies spread southwestward into

western Asia Minor and southeastward into the Assyrian and Babylonian empires. Jeremiah, vengefully predicting the downfall of the Babylonians in the early sixth-century BCE, after their destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, proclaims: “Blow the trumpet among the nations, prepare the nations against her [Babylon], call together against her the kingdoms of Ararat, Minni [both in Armenia], and Ashkenaz.”

As we have seen, the book of Genesis connects the Scythians, or descendants of Ashkenaz, with the Cimmerians, or descendants of Gomer, and historically indeed, the two peoples were closely related, since they were originally neighbors north of the Black Sea, from where the stronger Scythians pushed the Cimmerians further south. A rather fanciful account of the wars between them can be found in Herodotus.

By talmudic times, however, both the Scythians and the Cimmerians had disappeared from the world, swallowed up by other nations. Casting about for the location of Gomer, the rabbis of the talmudic period took it on the basis of phonetic resemblance to be Germania, as the Romans referred to the Teutonic areas west of the Rhine whose tribes they were constantly battling. “Gomer is Germamya [sic],” says the tractate of Yoma, while the tractate of Megillah tells us: “There are three hundred crown wearers [that is, petty kings] in Germamya and three-hundred-sixty-five lords in Rome, and every day they go forth and kill one another because they are too busy fighting to have time to unite under a single king.”

This is no doubt the reason that Ashkenaz, the biblical son of Gomer, came to be associated with Germany, too. This association may have been strengthened further by the name Scandza, as Scandinavia, the Germanic-speaking north of Europe, was often referred to in medieval times. By the middle ages, we find Ashkenaz being widely used for Germany in Jewish sources (when the 11th-century Rashi, for example, translates a Hebrew word into German in his commentaries, he gives it to us in “the language of Ashkenaz”), and before long it became the standard term.

Originally, therefore, an ashkenazi in Hebrew was a Jewish inhabitant of Germany. (It doesn’t appear in any Jewish source in the sense of Scythian.) Yet as Jews migrated eastward and northward to Slavic lands from German ones, taking with them “the language of Ashkenaz” (which gradually turned into Eastern European Yiddish), “Ashkenazi” came to denote any Yiddish-speaking Jew, and eventually — as it does today — any descendant of Yiddish-speaking Jews. Ashkenaz, on the other hand, continued to refer in Hebrew to Germany alone, until it was replaced in the 20th century by *germanya* so as to avoid the ambiguity of *ashkenazim* meaning both non-Jewish Germans and Jewish speakers of Yiddish. As for *germamya*, it is gone from the world, along with the Cimmerians and Scythians.

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## Ashkenazim

by Shira Schoenberg

The name Ashkenaz was applied in the Middle Ages to Jews living along the Rhine River in northern France and western Germany. The center of Ashkenazi Jews later spread to Poland-Lithuania and now there are Ashkenazi settlements all over the world. The term "Ashkenaz" became identified primarily with German customs and descendants of German Jews.

In the 10th and 11th century, the first Ashkenazim, Jewish merchants in France and Germany, were economic pioneers, treated well because of their trading connections with the Mediterranean and the East. Jewish communities appeared in many urban centers. Early Ashkenaz communities were small and homogeneous. Until Christian guilds were formed, Jews were craftsmen and artisans. In France, many Jews owned vineyards and made wine. They carried arms and knew how to use them in self-defense. The Jews of each town constituted an independent, self-governing entity. Each community, or *kahal*, established its own regulations made up by an elected board and judicial courts. They enforced their rulings with the threat of excommunication. The Ashkenazim generally shied away from outside influences and concentrated on internal Jewish sources, ideas and customs.

Ashkenazim focused on biblical and Talmudic studies. Centers of rabbinic scholarship appeared in the tenth century in Mainz and Worms in the Rhineland and in Troyes and Sens in France. Ashkenazi scholarship centered around oral discussion. Sages focused on understanding the minutiae of the texts instead of extracting general principles. The most famous early teacher was Rabbenu Gershom of Mainz. Some of his decrees, such as that forbidding polygamy, are still in existence today. The first major Ashkenazi literary figure was Rashi (Solomon ben Isaac of Troyes, 1040-1105), whose commentaries on the Bible and Talmud are today considered fundamental to Jewish study. The *tosafists*, Ashkenazi Talmudic scholars in northern France and Germany, introduced new methods and insights into Talmudic study that are also still in use. Early Ashkenazi Jews composed religious poetry modeled after the fifth and sixth century *piyyutim* (liturgical poems). While prayer liturgy varied even among Ashkenazi countries, the differences were almost insignificant compared to the differences between Sephardi and Ashkenazi liturgy.

While Ashkenazi Jews occasionally experience anti-Semitism, mob violence first erupted against them at the end of the 11th century. Many Jews were killed in what Robert Seltzer calls a "supercharged religious atmosphere." Many were willing to die as martyrs rather than convert.

In the 12th and 13th centuries, many Ashkenazi Jews became moneylenders. They were supported by the secular rulers who benefited from taxes imposed on the Jews. The rulers did not totally protect them, however, and blood libels cropped up accompanied by violence. In 1182, Jews were expelled from France. Ashkenazi Jews continued to build communities in Germany until they faced riots and massacres in the 1200s and 1300s. Some Jews moved to Sephardi Spain while others set up Ashkenazi communities in Poland.

The center of Ashkenazi Jewry shifted to Poland, Lithuania, Bohemia and Moravia in the beginning of the 16th century. Jews were for the first time concentrated in Eastern Europe instead of Western Europe. Polish Jews adopted the Ashkenazi rites, liturgy, and religious customs of the German Jews. The Ashkenazi mahzor (holiday prayer book) included prayers composed by poets of Germany and Northern France. In Poland, the Jews became fiscal agents, tax collectors, estate managers for noblemen, merchants and craftsmen. In the 1500-1600s, Polish Jewry grew to be the largest Jewish community in the diaspora. Many Jews lived in shtetls, small towns where the majority of the inhabitants were Jewish. They set up kehillot like those in the Middle Ages that elected a board of trustees to collect taxes, set up education systems and deal with other necessities of Jewish life. The Jews even had their own craft guilds. Each kahal had a yeshiva, where boys over the age of 13 learned Talmudic and rabbinic texts. Yiddish was the language of oral translation and of discussion of Torah and Talmud. Ashkenazi scholars focused on careful readings of the text and also on summarizing legal interpretations of former Ashkenazi and Sephardi scholars of Jewish law.

Ashkenazim focused on Hebrew, Torah and especially Talmud. They used religion to protect themselves from outside influences. The Jews at this time were largely middle class. By choice, they mostly lived in self-contained communities surrounding their synagogue and other communal institutions. Yiddish was the common language of Ashkenazi Jews in eastern and central Europe. With the start of the Renaissance and religious wars in the late 16th century, a divide grew between central and eastern European Jews. In central Europe, particularly in Germany, rulers forced the Jews to live apart from the rest of society in ghettos with between 100 and 500 inhabitants. The ghettos were generally clean and in good condition. Eastern European Jews lived in the shtetls, where Jews and gentiles lived side by side.

In the 1600s and 1700s, Jews in Poland, the center of Ashkenazi Jewry, faced blood libels and riots. The growth of Hasidism in Poland drew many Jews away from typical Ashkenazi practice. After the Chmielnicki massacres in Poland in 1648, Polish Jews spread through Western Europe, some even crossing the Atlantic. Many Ashkenazi Polish Jews fled to Amsterdam and joined previously existing communities of German Jews. Sephardim there considered the Ashkenazim to be socially and culturally inferior. While the Sephardim were generally wealthy, the Ashkenazim were poor peddlers, petty traders, artisans, diamond polishers, jewelry workers and silversmiths. As the Sephardim became poorer in the 18th century, the communities became more equal and more united.

The Jewish community in England also changed in the 1700s. It had been primarily Sephardi throughout the 1600s, but it became more Ashkenazi in culture as growing numbers of German and Polish Jews arrived.

By 1750, out of 2,500 Jews in the American Colonies, the majority was Ashkenazi. They were Yiddish-speaking Jews from Holland, Germany, Poland and England. The first Jews were merchants and traders. Since then, Ashkenazi Jews have built up communities throughout the United States.

By the end of the 19th century, as a result of Russian persecution, there was massive Ashkenazi emigration from Eastern Europe to other areas of Europe, Australia, South Africa, the United

States and Israel. Ashkenazim outnumbered Sephardim everywhere except North Africa, Italy, the Middle East and parts of Asia. Before World War II, Ashkenazim comprised 90% of world Jewry.

The destruction of European Jewry in World War II reduced the number of Ashkenazim and, to some extent, their numeric superiority over Sephardim. The United States became the main center for Ashkenazi Jews.

Over time Ashkenazim and Sephardim developed different prayer liturgies, Torah services, Hebrew pronunciation and ways of life. Originally, most Ashkenazim spoke Yiddish. Ashkenazi and Sephardi tunes for both prayers and Torah reading are different. An Ashkenazi Torah lies flat while being read, while a Sephardi Torah stands up. Ashkenazi scribes developed a distinctive script. One major difference is in the source used for deciding Jewish law. Sephardim follow Rabbi Joseph Caro's Shulhan Arukh. The Ashkenazim go by Rabbi Moses Isserles, who wrote a commentary on the Shulhan Arukh citing Ashkenazi practice. There are differences in many aspects of Jewish law, from which laws women are exempt from to what food one is allowed to eat on Passover. Today, many of the distinctions between Ashkenazim and Sephardim have disappeared. In both Israel and the United States today, Ashkenazim and Sephardim live side by side, though they generally have separate institutions.

In Israel, political tensions continue to exist because of feelings on the part of many Sephardim that they have been discriminated against and still don't get the respect they deserve. Historically, the political elite of the nation have been Ashkenazim; however, this is gradually changing. Shas, a religious Sephardi party, has become one of the most powerful in the country and individual Sephardi politicians now hold powerful positions. Moroccan-born David Levy, for example, has served as foreign minister and, in July 2000, Iranian-born Moshe Katsav was elected president.

An international team of scientists announced on September 9 2014 that they had come to the conclusion that all Ashkenazi Jews are descended from an original group of about 350 individuals who lived between 600 and 800 years ago. These people were of Middle-Eastern and European descent. The analysis was done by comparing the DNA data of 128 Ashkenazi Jews with the DNA of a reference group of 26 Flemish people from Belgium, and then working out which genetic markers are unique to people of Ashkenazi descent. The similarities in the Ashkenazi genomes allowed the scientists to identify a base point from which all Ashkenazi Jews descend. According to the scientists, this effectively makes all modern Ashkenazi Jews 30th cousins, stemming from the same population almost 800 years ago. This discovery may help medical professionals treat genetic diseases, because diseases like Tay Sachs and certain types of cancers are more prevalent in the Ashkenazi Jewish population. In order to treat these diseases doctors will now have a better idea of where to sequence an individual's genome to test for disease susceptibility. This discovery also effectively disproves the idea that Ashkenazi Jews were descended from Khazars who converted to Judaism during the 8th or 9th centuries C.E.

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ASHKENAZ (Heb. אֲשְׁכְּנַז), a people and a country bordering on Armenia and the upper Euphrates; listed in Genesis 10:3 and I Chronicles 1:6 among the descendants of \*Gomer . The name Ashkenaz also occurs once in Jeremiah 51:27 in a passage calling upon the kingdoms of \*Ararat , Minni, and Ashkenaz to rise and destroy Babylon. Scholars have identified the Ashkenaz as the people called Ashkuza (Ashguza, Ishguza) in Akkadian. According to Assyrian royal inscriptions the Ashkuza fought the Assyrians in the reign of Esharhaddon (680–669 B.C.E.) as allies of the Minni (Manneans). Since the Ashkuza are mentioned in conjunction with the Gimirrai-Cimmerians and the Ashkenaz with Gomer in Genesis, it is reasonable to infer that Ashkenaz is a dialectal form of Akkadian Ashkuza, identical with a group of Iranian-speaking people organized in confederations of tribes called Saka in Old Persian, whom Greek writers (e.g., Herodotus 1:103) called Scythians. They ranged from southern Russia through the Caucasus and into the Near East. Some scholars, however, have argued against this identification on philological grounds because of the presence of the "n" in the word Ashkenaz. In medieval rabbinical literature the name was used for Germany (see next entry).

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[Yehoshua M. Grintz]

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## Ashkenazi

Nineteenth century Ashkenazi Jews of Vienna in their synagogue on Yom Kippur  
Ashkenazi Jews, also known as Ashkenazic Jews or Ashkenazim, are Jews descended from the medieval Jewish communities of the Rhineland—"Ashkenaz" being the Medieval Hebrew name for Germany. They are distinguished from Sephardic Jews, the other main group of European Jewry, who arrived earlier in Europe and lived primarily in Spain.

Many Ashkenazim later migrated, largely eastward, forming communities in Germany, Hungary, Poland, Russia, Eastern Europe, and elsewhere between the tenth and nineteenth centuries. From medieval times until the mid-twentieth century, the lingua franca among Ashkenazi Jews was primarily Yiddish.

The Ashkenazi Jews developed a distinct liturgy and culture, influenced to varying degrees, by interaction with surrounding peoples, predominantly Germans, Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Kashubians, Hungarians, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Letts, Belarusians, and Russians.

Although in the eleventh century they comprised only three percent of the world's Jewish population, Ashkenazi Jews accounted for 92 percent of the world's Jews in 1931, and today make up approximately 80 percent of Jews worldwide. Most Jewish communities with extended histories in Europe are Ashkenazim, with the exception of Sephardic Jews associated with the Mediterranean region. A significant portion of the Jews who migrated from Europe to other continents in the past two centuries are Eastern Ashkenazim, particularly in the United States. Ashkenazi Jews have made major contributions to world culture in terms of science, literature, economics, and the arts.

#### Origins of Ashkenazim

Ashkenazi Jews (יהודי אשכנז Yehudei Ashkenaz)

Total population: 8- 11.2 million (estimate)

Regions with significant populations:

United States 5-6 million[1]

Israel 3-4 million[1]

European Union ~1,030,000

Russia 400,000

Canada ~ 240,000

Argentina 200,000

Germany 100,000

South Africa 80,000

Languages: Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian, English

Religions: Judaism

Related ethnic groups:

Sephardi Jews, Mizrahi Jews, and other Jewish ethnic divisions

Ashkenaz is a Medieval Hebrew name for Germany. European Jews came to be called "Ashkenaz" because the main centers of Jewish learning were located in Germany.

The Ashkenazi Jewish population originated in the Middle East. When they arrived in northern France and the Rhineland sometime around 800-1000 C.E., the Ashkenazi Jews brought with them both Rabbinic Judaism and the Babylonian Talmudic culture that underlies it. Yiddish, once spoken by the vast majority of Ashkenazi Jewry, is a Jewish language which developed from the Middle High German vernacular, heavily influenced by Hebrew and Aramaic.

#### Background in the Roman Empire

After the forced Jewish exile from Jerusalem in 70 C.E. and the complete Roman takeover of Judea following the Bar Kochba rebellion of 132-135 C.E., Jews continued to be a majority of the population in Palestine for several hundred years. In Palestine and Mesopotamia, where Jewish religious scholarship was centered, the majority of Jews were still engaged in farming. Trade was also a common occupation, facilitated by the easy mobility of traders through the dispersed Jewish communities.

In the late Roman Empire, small numbers of Jews are known to have lived in Cologne and Trier, as well as in what is now France. However, it is unclear whether there is any continuity between these late Roman communities and the distinct Ashkenazi Jewish culture that began to emerge about 500 years later.

## Rabbinic Judaism moves to Ashkenaz

In Mesopotamia and in Persian lands free of Roman imperial domination, Jewish life had a long history. Since the conquest of Judea by Nebuchadnezzar II in the early sixth century B.C.E., "Babylonian Jews" had always been the leading diaspora community, rivaling the leadership of Palestine. When conditions for Jews began to deteriorate in the western Roman Empire, many of the religious leaders of Judea and Galilee fled to the east. At the academies of Pumbeditha and Sura near Babylon, Rabbinic Judaism based on talmudic learning began to emerge and assert its authority over Jewish life throughout the diaspora. Rabbinic Judaism also created a religious mandate for literacy, requiring all Jewish males to learn Hebrew and read from the Torah. This emphasis on literacy and learning a second language would eventually be of great benefit to the Jews, allowing them to take on commercial and financial roles within Gentile societies where literacy was often quite low.

After the Islamic conquest of the Middle East and North Africa, new opportunities for trade and commerce opened between the Middle East and Western Europe. The vast majority of Jews in the world now lived in Islamic lands. Urbanization, trade, and commerce within the Islamic world allowed Jews to abandon farming and live in cities, engaging in occupations where they could use their skills. The influential, sophisticated, and well-organized Jewish community of Mesopotamia, now centered in Baghdad, became the center of the Jewish world. In the Caliphate of Baghdad, Jews took on many of the financial occupations that they would later hold in the cities of Ashkenaz. Jewish traders from Baghdad began to travel to the west, renewing Jewish life in the western Mediterranean region. They brought with them Rabbinic Judaism and Babylonian Talmudic scholarship.

[The Rashi Synagogue in Worms, a city where the great Ashkenazi sage studied]

After 800 C.E., Charlemagne's unification of former Frankish lands with northern Italy and Rome brought on a brief period of stability and unity in Western Europe. This created opportunities for Jewish merchants to settle north of the Alps. Charlemagne granted the Jews in his lands freedoms similar to those once enjoyed under the ancient Roman Empire. In Frankish lands, many Jewish merchants took on occupations in finance and commerce, including moneylending or usury. (Church legislation banned Christians from lending money to fellow Christians in exchange for interest.) Although the Sephardic community in Islamic Spain was far better established at first, by the eleventh century, when the great rabbinic sage Rashi of Troyes wrote his talmudic commentaries, Ashkenazi Jews had emerged as a strong community capable of major cultural contributions to Jewish civilization.

## DNA clues

Efforts to identify the origins of Ashkenazi Jews through DNA analysis began in the 1990s. Like most DNA studies of human migration patterns, these studies have focused on two segments of the human genome, the Y chromosome (inherited only by males), and the mitochondrial genome (DNA which passes from mother to child). Both segments are unaffected by recombination. Thus, they provide an indicator of paternal and maternal origins, respectively.

Recent research indicates that a significant portion of Ashkenazi maternal ancestry is also of Middle Eastern origin. A 2006 study by Behar et al. [2] suggested that about 40 percent of the current Ashkenazi population is descended matrilineally from just four women. These four "founder lineages" were "likely from a Hebrew/Levantine mtDNA pool" originating in the Near East in the first and second centuries C.E.

### Ashkenazi migrations

The Rhineland area was the first place of settlement of the future Ashkenazi Jews. Historical records show evidence of Jewish communities north of the Alps and Pyrenees as early as the eighth and ninth century, especially in the Rhineland area, where they at first established trading establishments and later more settled communities under the protection of feudal lords. By the early 900s, Jewish populations were well-established in Northern Europe and later followed the Norman Conquest into England in 1066, also settling in the Rhineland. With the onset of the Crusades and the expulsions of Jews from England (1290), France (1394), and parts of Germany (1400s), Jewish migration pushed eastward into Poland, Lithuania, and Russia.

Due to Christian European prohibitions restricting certain land ownership and guild membership by Jews, Jewish economic activity was focused on trade, business management, and financial services.

By the 1400s, the Ashkenazi Jewish communities in Poland were the largest Jewish communities of the diaspora. Poland at this time was a decentralized medieval monarchy, incorporating lands from Latvia to Romania, including much of modern Lithuania and Ukraine. This area, which eventually fell under the domination of Russia, Austria, and Prussia (Germany), would remain the main center of Ashkenazi Jewry until the Holocaust.

### Customs, laws and traditions

Ashkenazi Jews study the Talmud.

The collective corpus of Jewish religious law, including biblical law and later, Talmudic and rabbinic customs and traditions of Ashkenazi Jews may differ from those of Sephardi Jews, particularly in matters of custom.

Well-known differences in practice include:

Observance of Passover: Ashkenazi Jews traditionally—though less so recently—refrain from eating legumes, corn, millet, and rice, whereas Sephardi Jews typically do not prohibit these foods.

Ashkenazi Jews freely mix and eat fish and milk products; some Sephardic Jews refrain from doing so, considering fish to be included in the category of "meat," which Talmudic tradition says cannot be mixed with milk.

Ashkenazim are also somewhat more liberal in other matters related to Jewish dietary law for the proper preparation of kosher meat.

Ashkenazim are more permissive than Sephardim toward the usage of wigs, rather than scarves and shawls, as a hair covering for married and widowed women.

Ashkenazi Jews frequently name newborn children after deceased family members, but not after living relatives. Sephardi Jews, on the other hand, often name their children after the children's grandparents, even if those grandparents are still living.

Ashkenazi tefillin (the two boxes containing Biblical verses and the leather straps attached to them which are used in traditional Jewish prayer) bear some differences from Sephardic tefillin. In the traditional Ashkenazic rite, the tefillin are wound towards the body, not away from it. Ashkenazim traditionally don tefillin while standing whereas other Jews generally do so while sitting down.

Ashkenazic traditional pronunciations of Hebrew differ from those of other groups.

Who is an Ashkenazi Jew?

An Ashkenazi Jew can be defined religiously, culturally, or ethnically. Since the overwhelming majority of Ashkenazi Jews no longer live in Eastern Europe, the isolation that once fostered their distinct religious tradition and culture has vanished. Furthermore, the word "Ashkenazi" is itself evolving and taking on new meanings.

In a religious sense, an Ashkenazi Jew is any Jew whose family tradition and ritual follows Ashkenazi practice. When the Ashkenazi community first began to develop, the centers of Jewish religious authority were in the Islamic world, at Baghdad and in Islamic Spain. Ashkenaz (Germany) was so distant geographically that it developed a tradition of its own, and Ashkenazi Hebrew came to be pronounced in ways distinct from other forms of Hebrew.

In a cultural sense, an Ashkenazi Jew can be identified by the concept of Yiddishkeit, a word that literally means "Jewishness" in the Yiddish language. Originally this meant the study of Torah and Talmud for men, and a family and communal life governed by the observance of Jewish Law for men and women. From the Rhineland to Riga to Romania, most Jews prayed in liturgical Ashkenazi Hebrew, and spoke some dialect of Yiddish in their secular lives.

However, with modernization, Yiddishkeit began to encompass not just Orthodoxy and Hasidism, but a broad range of movements, ideologies, practices, and traditions in which Ashkenazi Jews have participated and somehow retained a sense of Jewishness. As Ashkenazi Jews moved away from Eastern Europe, settling mostly in North America and Israel, the geographic isolation which gave rise to Ashkenazim has given way to mixing with other cultures, and with non-Ashkenazi Jews who, similarly, are no longer isolated in distinct geographic locales. In Israel, Hebrew has replaced Yiddish as the primary Jewish language for the vast majority of Ashkenazi Jews.

[An Ashkenazi Jewish man with a Persian Jewish woman, whose ancestors lived in Iran, in San Francisco (2003).]

As Jews from different ethnic backgrounds marry one another, the ethnic differences within Judaism are blurring. By tradition, Jewish status is inherited through the maternal lineage. Therefore, someone who is descended from a Jewish mother, even if totally unaware of their Jewish heritage, is a Jew. A large proportion of Ashkenazi Jews in Israel, the U.S., and the former Soviet Union are not religiously observant. Even a Jew who converts to another religion, though an apostate, is still considered a Jew. Karl Marx, an atheist whose Jewish mother and father had converted to Christianity before he was born, was an Ashkenazi Jew.

In an ethnic sense, an Ashkenazi Jew is one whose ancestry can be traced to the Jews of central and Eastern Europe. For roughly a thousand years, the Ashkenazi Jews were a reproductively isolated population in Europe. However, since the middle of the twentieth century, many Ashkenazi Jews have intermarried, both with members of other Jewish communities and with people of other nations and faiths. Conversion to Judaism, rare for nearly 1500 years, has once again become common. Thus, the concept of Ashkenazi Jews as a distinct ethnic people, especially in ways that can be defined ancestrally and therefore traced genetically, has also blurred considerably.

In Israel, Jews of mixed background are increasingly common, partly because of intermarriage between Ashkenazi and non-Ashkenazi partners, and partly because some do not identify with such historic markers as relevant to their life experiences as Jews. Religious Ashkenazi Jews living in Israel are obliged to follow the authority of the chief Ashkenazi rabbi in halakhic matters.

#### Modern history

In an essay on Sephardi Jewry, Daniel Elazar at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs summarized the demographic history of Ashkenazi Jews in the last thousand years, noting that at the end of the eleventh century, 97 percent of world Jewry was Sephardic and 3 percent Ashkenazi; in the mid-seventeenth century, "Sephardim still outnumbered Ashkenazim three to two," but by the end of the eighteenth century "Ashkenazim outnumbered Sephardim three to two, the result of improved living conditions in Christian Europe versus the Muslim world. "By 1931, Ashkenazi Jews accounted for nearly 92 percent of world Jewry.

[The Vilna (Lithuania) edition of the Talmud.]

Ashkenazi Jews developed the Hasidic movement as well as major Jewish academic centers across Poland, Russia, and Lithuania in the generations after emigration from the west. After two centuries of comparative tolerance in the new nations, massive westward emigration occurred in the 1800s and 1900s in response to pogroms and the economic opportunities offered in other parts of the world. Ashkenazi Jews have made up the majority of the American Jewish community since 1750. Ashkenazi cultural growth led to the Haskalah or Jewish Enlightenment, and the development of Zionism in modern Europe.

However, Ashkenazi Jews were the primary victims of the Nazi campaign to eradicate European Jewry. Of the estimated 8.8 million Jews living in Europe at the beginning of World War II, the majority of whom were Ashkenazi, about six million—more than two-thirds—were systematically murdered in the Holocaust. These included three million of 3.3 million Polish Jews (91 percent); 900,000 of 1.1 million in Ukraine (82 percent); and 50 to 90 percent of the Jews of other Slavic nations, Germany, France, Hungary, and the Baltic states. The only non-Ashkenazi community to have suffered similar depletions were the Jews of Greece. Many of the surviving Ashkenazi Jews emigrated to countries such as Israel, Australia, and the United States after the war.

Today, Ashkenazi Jews constitute approximately 80 percent of world Jewry, but probably less than half of Israeli Jews. Nevertheless they have traditionally played a prominent role in the media, economy, and politics of Israel. Tensions have sometimes arisen between the mostly

Ashkenazi elite whose families founded the state, and later migrants from various non-Ashkenazi groups.

## Achievement

Ashkenazi Jews have a noted history of achievement in western societies. They have won a disproportionate share of major academic prizes, such as the Nobel awards and the Fields Medal in mathematics. In those societies where they have been free to enter any profession, they have a record of high occupational achievement, entering professions and fields of commerce where higher education is required. Ashkenazim have also made major contributions in literature, economic leadership, and the arts.

## Notes

↑ 1.0 1.1 Gabriel E. Feldman, Noia 64 mimetypes pdf.pngPDF , Israel Medical Association Journal, Volume 3, 2001.

↑ Doron M. Behar and Ene Metspalu, Toomas Kivisild, Alessandro Achilli, Yarin Hadid, Shay Tzur, Luisa Pereira, Antonio Amorim, Lluís Quintana-Murci, Kari Majamaa, Corinna Herrnstadt, Neil Howell, Oleg Balanovsky, Ildus Kutuev, Andrey Pshenichnov, David Gurwitz, Batsheva Bonne-Tamir, Antonio Torroni, Richard Villems, and Karl Skorecki. "The Matrilineal Ancestry of Ashkenazi Jewry: Portrait of a Recent Founder Event." In *The American Journal of Human Genetics* (7 (3) (March, 2006): 487-497, PMID 16404693

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## External links

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