



Ashkenaz at the Crossroads of Cultural Transfer. Seminar für Judaistik, Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main, 05.11.2012-07.11.2012.

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Ashkenaz at the Crossroads of Cultural Transfer

The major international conference “Ashkenaz at the Crossroads of Cultural Transfer,” hosted by the Seminar für Judaistik at Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main (sponsored by the Thyssen Foundation and the Gesellschaft zur Förderung Judaistischer Studien in Frankfurt am Main e.V.), situated Jewish culture in medieval and early modern Ashkenaz (i.e. the German lands and Northern France) at the crossroads of cultural transfer. While pre-modern Ashkenaz, a major cultural center of medieval and early modern Judaism, has long been seen as a self-sufficient, enclosed entity without much contact to the outside world, the conference started from the notion that culture is not uniform, but represents a comprehensive network of socio-political, material, and ideological conditions, developed by processes of inclusion and exclusion, integration and disintegration. Thus, Ashkenazi culture and society is to be perceived as composed of various elements brought together by dynamic contacts between people, texts, and ideas. While a new generation of historians has shown that Jews and Christians in pre-modern German lands shared numerous cultural, religious and literary notions, the conference aimed for an expansion and systematic application of the approach of cultural transfer to include inner-Jewish transfer as well. Thus, the conference marks a paradigm shift in the study of Ashkenaz with the ultimate goal of attaining a more nuanced knowledge of Jewish culture in medieval and early modern Germany.

The conveners of the conference, ELISABETH HOLLENDER and REBEKKA VOSS (both Frankfurt am Main), opened with a theoretical introduction on the concept of cultural transfer, including both “object-based goods” and “concept-based goods” and its application to the study of medieval and early modern Ashkenaz. Despite a growing interest in questions of cultural transfer involving medieval Ashkenaz, Hollender observed that we still hesitate to conceptualize Medieval Ashkenazic Jewry as a significant trade hub of cultural goods. She suggested,

however, to re-examine some of the cultural areas that have been neglected regarding cultural transfer. Subsequently, Voß asked what makes cultural transfer medieval and what makes it early modern. Sketching out four kinds of cultural transfer (transfer in temporal distance, transfer in geographical distance, transfer between specific segments of society, media of cultural transfer), she raised a number of questions about their implications for medieval and early modern Ashkenaz. Concluding the session, MARGIT MERSCH (Göttingen) presented to the audience that consisted mainly of scholars of Jewish Studies recent theories of cross-cultural connections that have been developing in the field of Medieval German History in the last years, triggered by the impression of globalization. Emphasizing that culture has a multidirectional pattern, Mersch discussed the benefits and limits of conceptual terms and models like hybridity, rhizome, and palimpsest that might also prove useful and inspire new paths for the study of Ashkenazic Jewish culture.

The first conference day was dedicated to the subject of *Cultural Transfer within Ashkenaz*. EPHRAIM KANARFOGEL (New York) discussed the German and Northern French rabbinic elite of the 12th/13th centuries. He showed that in contrast to the regnant perception, the Tosafists’ literary creativity was not restricted to Talmudic Studies. Rather, they were involved in a range of other disciplines including exegesis, liturgical poetry, magic and mysticism. IVAN MARCUS (New Haven) tried to find an answer why the Jews of France did not continue to exist as distinctive diaspora communities after their expulsion in 1306. He suggested that unlike the Jews of Ashkenaz and Sefarad, French Jews did not exist as organized communities and never developed a strong collective identity. They were therefore more receptive to other Jewish cultures they encountered after the expulsion. SIMHA EMANUEL (Jerusalem) described a serious vacuum of learning in the rabbinic study halls of Germany in the first quarter of the 13th century after

the death of Eleazar of Worms. For one generation (until R. Meir of Rothenburg) young scholars left Germany for France, Austria or Bohemia. NAOMI FEUCHTWANGER-SARIG (Tel Aviv) illustrated the way Jewish material goods were transformed in Early Modern Ashkenaz. She demonstrated how Jewish ritual objects were decorated according to aesthetic notions of the Christian environment. In addition to this process of acculturation, by a bottom-up process Christian folk rituals melded into Jewish daily life by adaptation, involving the use of objects that were closely parallel to those used by the local Christian society.

Each day of the conference was concluded by a roundtable. The first roundtable with ELISHEVA CARLEBACH (New York), JOHANNES HEIL (Heidelberg) and Ivan Marcus discussed the different types of cultural goods transferred and the ways these were changed. Marcus stressed the importance of language for the mechanisms of cultural transfer. He emphasized the different linguistic situations in Sefarad and Ashkenaz and their implication for participation in the culture of the majority society. Moreover, he pointed out that only written and material testimonies have survived, but one has to keep in mind that the inhabitants of medieval towns also shared smells and sounds. Heil specified the linguistic situation in medieval Italy where Jews spoke Greek and Latin until the 9th century, when Hebrew was revived. Elements of Greek and Latin were thus also transferred into the Jewish communities of Ashkenaz and Zarfat in their formative period between the 8th and the 10th centuries. While the scholarly notion of "Ashkenaz" was that of an isolated island, Carlebach underlined the embedding of Ashkenazic culture in its Christian environment and the great extent in which Jewish culture was influenced by Christian cultural and daily life such as language and literature, education, habits and the life cycle.

The second day of the conference started with a session on *The Media of Cultural Transfer*. SHLOMO BERGER (Amsterdam) discussed the important role of the printed book in Yiddish as the language of performance of the Ashkenazi majority for an Ashkenazi Diasporic Consciousness. MATT GOLDISH (Columbus, OH) read the transfer of the relics of the messiah Shlomo Molkho to Prague as symbolically representing a larger shift of Jewish people and culture from Germany toward Central and Eastern Europe. The influential Horowitz family of Prague was instrumental in this deeply symbolic act.

ASTRID LEMBKE (Berlin) initiated the following ses-

sion on *Cultural Transfer between Jews and Christians* with a lecture on the shared Jewish-Christian narrative pattern of the erotic relationship between a man and a non-human woman often used in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Times to discuss conflicts around creating social identities. YAACOV DEUTSCH (Jerusalem) illuminated the blurring of boundaries between Judaism and Christianity when Jewish and Christians worked on shared texts. In his 18th-century Hebrew translation and commentary on the Book of Luke, Immanuel Frommann blended Jewish and Christian ideas together in the endeavor to understand the text. Shared concepts of dealing with the poor among Christians and Jews can be detected in historical and administrative documents on welfare in medieval Ashkenaz as RAINER BARZEN (Jerusalem) showed. EPHRAIM SHOHAM-STEINER (Beer Sheva) introduced cases of collaboration between Christians and Jews in acts that have been regarded as crimes in Ashkenaz. Obviously, the conflict between the two religions became less important when it came to business opportunities, bribes and smuggling. The greed for profit was shared by Jews and Christians across social strata. BIRGIT KLEIN (Heidelberg) discussed the transfer of family property. Klein investigated changes in Jewish legal practice in order to alleviate legal discrimination against women regarding inheritance of a deceased husband's or father's estate by introducing principles of non-Jewish legal practice into Jewish practice.

The *Transfer of Norms* was the topic of Tuesday's roundtable with MARTHA KEIL (Vienna), EVA HAVERKAMP (Munich), and ELLIOTT HOROWITZ (Ramat Gan). In cases of transfer between majority and minority cultures especially, the transfer of norms is critical, since norms usually influence group identities. Haverkamp started with an example based on the events of the First Crusade in 1096: A Christian monk living in a monastery in Disibodenberg who was familiar with the description of the events in the Hebrew chronicles described the Jewish martyrological deeds with empathy and offered the same Scripture-based explanations as the Hebrew chroniclers. He even tried to make the Jews' acts understandable by referring to their pain and feelings. Keil demonstrated the role of women in business and pointed out the shared dating schedules for markets and fairs in Jewish notebooks and diaries that were set according to the Christian calendar. Finally, Horowitz highlighted the discrepancy between the strict regulations of women covering their faces in the commentaries of Rashi and David Kimhi while Hebrew manuscript illuminations of the 15th and 16th centuries show women with bare breasts or even completely naked. Similarly,

late medieval and early modern commentators were not opposed to men bathing together with non-Jewish women. A general discussion on the difference between shared norms and transfer of norms and the complex relationship of social behavior, oral and written transmission followed.

The keynote lecture on Tuesday evening was given by Elisheva Carlebach on the topic of Jewish Calendars, giving a glimpse into the wealth of information that Jewish calendars provide about the transfer of time in Ashkenaz and more generally about cultural transfer in early modern Jewish history. Dating and measuring time is a universal good and is based on shared definitions of hours, days, months and years. Although the scheme of dating is similar in Jewish and in Christian culture, Carlebach illustrated the moments of polemics between Jews and Christians, in particular within textual and visual plays of words.

The conference's last day was dedicated to *Cultural Transfer into and out of Ashkenaz*. ESPERANZA ALFONSO (Madrid) traced principles of peshat-commentary according to Rashi that were transferred into 13th century Castille. To what extent local customs could contradict official rules was the topic of EDWARD FRAM (Beer Sheva). He dealt with the timing of postpartum ritual immersion as an example in which the medieval local Frankfurt custom continued to be more stringent in the 18th century than what the *Shulhan arukh* allowed. SASKIA DÖNITZ (Frankfurt/Berlin) gave an overview of the transfer from Byzantium to Ashkenaz, singling out Ashkenazic traditions that were shaped by concepts transmitted via Byzantium. She called for an analysis of cultural patterns of Byzantine and Ashkenazic cultures to draw a clearer picture of what kind of goods have been integrated and what has been rejected during the formative period of Ashkenazic identity. MICHA PERRY (Haifa) explored the foundation legend of the *ve-Hu Rahum* prayer circulating in the Jewish communities in Ashkenaz and France as well as in Latin and Old French sources. With the legend being connected to the foundation legend of the Jewish communities in France, North Africa as well as England, it testifies to medieval knowledge transmission in Europe.

The concluding roundtable on Wednesday with LUCIA RASPE (Potsdam/Frankfurt), ELCHANAN REINER (Tel Aviv), and FELICITAS SCHMIEDER (Hagen) dealt with *Transfer in Distance*. The participants discussed the adaptations of cultural goods transported over time and geographical distance, and the significance of this transfer for the various Jewish communities, distant from one

another in time and space, in developing some kind of Jewish identity. Raspe gave the example of Ashkenazic Jews migrating to Northern Italy where they created the hagiographic legends of Ashkenaz. Ashkenazic identity was thus at first preserved in Northern Italy, until the ghettoization in the 16th century forced the Ashkenazic immigrants to mingle with Italian Jews, producing a new hybrid Jewish-Italian identity. Schmieder pointed to the improbability of long distance contacts, paired with the expectation that people in far-away countries are very different. Permanent long distance contact was not the norm in the Christian Middle Ages. In this point, Schmieder suspected, the Jewish communities of the Diaspora were an exception because they maintained contact over long distances and even continents. Finally, Reiner drew a picture of the major transformations of the Jewish cultural map of Ashkenaz in the 16th century. While the old centers on the Rhine were declining in the Early Modern Times, the Polish communities developed into new and dominant centers of Ashkenazic learning and culture. Reiner also underlined the importance of print: Fixating a text that had been transmitted orally and in manuscript substituted the fluidity of texts with more uniformed versions. The concluding discussion took up various points raised throughout the conference, among them, the role of languages (Yiddish vernacular vs. Hebrew), the importance of crisis, rupture and migration for the process of selecting and preserving tradition, and the question when Ashkenazic culture became consciously Ashkenazic and why it was successfully preserved through today.

Locating Ashkenaz in a network of connections within Jewish and non-Jewish communities proximate and distant in both time and space, the conference has affirmed that the culture of medieval and early modern Ashkenaz was far from homogeneous. This scholarly application of cultural transfer may serve as a model for the study of other communities, Jewish and non-Jewish, historical and contemporary alike, especially considering its relevance to our increasingly globalized culture.

Conference Overview

Session: Cultural Transfer in Theory

Elisabeth Hollender and Rebekka Voß (Frankfurt): Ashkenaz at the Crossroads of Cultural Transfer: Medieval and Early Modern Perspectives

Margit Mersch (Göttingen): Transculturality: Recent Theories of Cross-Cultural Connections

Session: Cultural Transfer Within Ashkenaz

Ephraim Kanarfogel (New York): The Interconnect-

edness of Medieval Ashkenazic Creativity: The Well-Rounded Rabbinic Culture of the Tosafists

Ivan Marcus (New Haven): Why did medieval French Jewry (Zarfat) Disappear?

Simha Emanuel (Jerusalem): The Sages of Germany in the 13th Century: Continuity and Change

Naomi Feuchtwanger-Sarig (Tel Aviv): Transported, Transformed, Transposed: Jewish Material Cultural Goods in Early Modern Ashkenaz

Roundtable - Transfer of Cultural Goods: Elisheva Carlebach (New York), Johannes Heil (Heidelberg), Ivan Marcus (New Haven)

Session: The Media of Cultural Transfer

Shlomo Berger (Amsterdam): The Yiddish Printed Word and Fixating an Ashkenazi Diasporic Consciousness

Matt Goldish (Columbus, OH): The Molkho Relics in Prague and the Eastward Shift of Ashkenazi Jewry

Session: Cultural Transfer between Jews and Christians

Astrid Lembke (Heidelberg): To Be and to Become a Man. The Struggle for Social Identity in Jewish and Christian Stories about Human-Demonic Relationships

Yaacov Deutsch (Jerusalem): A Jewish-Christian Commentary on the Book of Luke

Rainer Barzen (Jerusalem): The Poor of Your Own and the Poor of the Other: Jewish and Christian Welfare in

Medieval Ashkenaz

Ephraim Shoham-Steiner (Beer Sheva): Partners in Crime: Jewish and Non-Jewish Involvement in Crime in Medieval Ashkenaz

Birgit Klein (Heidelberg): Transfer of Family Property in Early Modern Ashkenazic Jewry in Interaction with non-Jewish Legal Practice

Roundtable: Transfer of Norms: Martha Keil (St. Pölten), Eva Haverkamp (München), Elliott Horowitz (Ramat Gan)

Elisheva Carlebach (New York): Jewish Calendars and the Transfer of Time

Session: Cultural Transfer into and out of Ashkenaz

Esperanza Alfonso (Madrid): Rashi in Early Thirteenth-Century Castille

Edward Fram (Beer Sheva): Shulhan Arukh as a Predator of German Customs: The Case of Postpartum Ritual Immersion

Saskia Dönitz (Frankfurt/Berlin): Bringing Byzantium to Ashkenaz

Micha Perry (Haifa): Diversity and Unity: Knowledge Transmission among European Jews in the Middle Ages

Roundtable: Transfer in Distance: Lucia Raspe (Potsdam/Frankfurt), Elchanan Reiner (Tel Aviv), Felicitas Schmieder (Hagen)

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