

The Jews of Arta  
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The first Jews in Arta were Romaniotes. They came from the Peloponese, mainly the cities of Corinthos and Patras, during the 10<sup>th</sup> century. The reasons for leaving were local persecutions and, in the case of the populace city of Nikopoli, Barbarian invasions and acts of destruction. When Benjamin of Tudela visited the Jewish Community of Arta in 1173, they had already been living in the city for many centuries. Later many Romaniotes from Corfu would flee to the city in 1246 during a war between Robert of Sicily and the Byzantine Empire.

The Jewish community of Arta is believed to be one of the oldest on Greek soil, going back over 1000 years.

The first to mention the Romaniote community of Arta was Benjamin of Tudela, in his travel diary compiled during his journey from Spain to Jerusalem in the 12<sup>th</sup> century where he made note of the Jewish communities he visited along the way. In his diary, published as "The Book of Travels", he wrote that after leaving Corfu, he went to Arta where he found a Jewish community of 100 families. He made note that they had a rich spiritual and religious life. He also noted that this was during the reign of the Byzantine Emperor Manuel Komninos II and that the leaders of the Jewish community of Arta were Rabbi Solomon and Rabbi Heracles.

When the Normans invaded the city of Arta, they did not trouble the Jews. The city was retaken by the Byzantine despots [Michael I of Epirus who put his son, Michael II in control of Arta and the surrounding area of Epirus]. It was during this period that the first large synagogue of Arta was built. It was located inside the kastro [fortified area] of the city. The synagogue took the name Kehila Kedosha Tassavim [The Holy Dwelling of the Congregation]. The sages asserted that the Jews who had come from Corfu had established a synagogue of the Corfiotes [Jews who descended from Corfu] which was later renamed "The Romaniote Synagogue." A *Midrash* was established in that synagogue which taught Hebrew and educated rabbis.

The Jewish community of Arta developed economically until 1346 when it suffered persecutions by the Serbian Stephano Dousan. When the Epirote Despots of the Orsini family retook the city, the Jews were able to reorganize and resume their former occupations and life.

With the Ottoman takeover of the city in 1449, the Jews began a long period of harmonious co-existence with the Ottoman Turks. They were allowed to practice their religion and freely engage in all economic pursuits. During the

Ottoman period, many Jews were able to establish themselves as merchants, monopolizing this particular aspect of the economy in Arta.

There is not much available historical documentation on the community life of the Jews of Arta from this period [Ottoman]. For some reason, the story of the Romaniotes remain obscure in the overall history of Ottoman Jewry. Many believe that their primary reason for this oversight was the numerical superiority of the Sephardic [Spanish] Jews.

The second reason given is that most of the rabbinical writings were being produced by the Sephardic Jews of Thessaloniki and Constantinople.

It is a well known fact that in 1492, Ferdinand and Isabella expelled the Jews of Iberia. They fled to Italy and Greece [Corfu, Trikkala, Volos, Larissa, Thessaloniki] and Constantinople. Neither Jews from Spain, nor Spanish-speaking Jews who came from Italy because of the expulsion, arrived in Arta. There were Jews who arrived from parts of Italy [native Italian Jews from Apulia, Calabria and Sardinia] who were forced to leave Italian soil in 1494. The Turks had no objection to the arrival of these Italian Jews in Arta and, along with the wealthy Jewish community of Corfu, the Jews of Arta helped the refugees to establish themselves. They established their own community and erected their own synagogue [called the Pugliese synagogue] near the Byzantine kastro. It was during this period that the great rabbi Samuel ben Moses Calni was born in Arta.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century there were at least 1,500 Jews in Arta, most of them Romaniote. Most of the immigrant Jews who came to Arta during this period were from Apulia in Italy and Patras in the Peloponese. According to Minna Rozen, "There were no Spanish Jews in Arta. The reason behind the preservation of Romaniote Jewry in the city [contrary to absorption of the Romaniote into Sephardic communities seen elsewhere on Greek soil] was that those Jews who arrived in the city of Arta were Italian and not Spanish and Italian Jews had a greater affinity in liturgy to the Romaniote than did the Sephardim. The Jews of Arta remained Greek speaking and had close relations with the Greek Christians in the city. The Jewish community remained a Greek-speaking community following the Romaniote liturgy until its tragic end in 1944." According to Nikos Stavroulakis, the Romaniote Jews were mainly found in the western part of Greece, such as Epirus which had very old established Romaniote communities in Ioannina, Arta and Preveza. Those three communities [especially Arta and Preveza] were in very close contact with the Jewish Community of Corfu.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the mercantile Jews of Arta engaged in commerce with not only Corfu, but Venice, Ragusa and other centers of trade along the Adriatic Coast. Under the Ottoman Turks, given the opportunity to expand their commercial ventures, they traded with many ports, constantly expanding their trade throughout the Mediterranean. They also ventured throughout

Macedonia and Thessaly and developed strong trade relations with Thessaloniki.

During the 17<sup>th</sup> century it is estimated that the Jewish Community of Arta numbered approximately 300 families, but it is possible that not all were inscribed in the municipal archives. This was not unusual and was a practice shared by both the Jews and Christians in the city in an attempt to avoid the extra taxes imposed by the Ottoman Turkish authorities.

The following century [the 18<sup>th</sup>], the Jews and the Christians, in spite of their harmonious co-existence, were reduced in side due to a serious of virulent epidemics in 1736,1737 and 1769. Between the years of 1816 and 1817, the monasteries of Lower Arta [The Monastery of the Virgin, The Monastery of the Bearer of God and the Monastery of the Shepherds] included 300 Jewish and Christian families.

The British tourist Henry Holland noted in his information on Arta that the administrator of customs was a Jew and that the Jews of the city were involved in all aspects of commerce.

W.W. Leake, who traveled throughout Northern Greece in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, wrote that in 1809 in the city of Arta there were 5,000 Greeks, 500 Turks and 500 Jews. In 1821, according to Kiriako Simopoulo, the population of Arta from 1810-1821 was 7,000 Greeks, 800 Turks and 1,000 Jews.

During the Greek War of Independence, it was noted that in certain areas of Greece there were serious conflicts between Jews and Christians. It was just the opposite in Arta. The Romaniote Jews of Arta identified with the Greek culture unlike Jews living elsewhere on Greek soil. This was due to common ethnic identifications that had endured through centuries of living closely together in the centuries preceding the War of Independence.

In 1864, the population of Arta is noted as follows: 5000 Christians, 1900 Ottomans and 1110 Jews. The Russian consul in Arta noted that of the 1,350 families in the city, 1050 were Christian, 210 Ottoman Turkish and 90 Jewish.

In 1881 Arta welcomed the King of Greece and was officially free from the Ottoman yoke of oppression, once more part of Greece. Most of the Jews of the city, along with most of the Christians, were waiting on June 24, 1881 to welcome the Greek Army into the city. During the ceremonies surrounding the entrance of Arta into the Modern State of Greece, in addition to the speeches by the Mayor and other politicians, the Metropolitan Bishop of the city [Seraphim], the Head Rabbi [Haim Isis] also spoke.

According to information recorded on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of July, 1881, two months after the liberation of Arta, the population of the city was as follows: 4990 residents:

4328 Greek Christians  
617 Jews [318 men and 299 women]  
45 Ottoman Turks