

The Synagogue in Christian Service. The Conversion of Synagogues at the turn of the 15th Century

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The conversion of synagogues¹ into Christian place of worship is a phenomenon that occurred throughout the history of this institution and is commonly known in scholarship. Nevertheless, it is a subject that has been little studied so far. This also applies to the medieval Iberian Peninsula.² This seems particularly astonishing, not only for the number of synagogue conversions that took place there—according to my research, more than 200 synagogues were converted into chapels, churches or monasteries by Christians between the 11th and 16th centuries—but also considering the notoriety of the phenomenon: "The Iberian peninsula [...] is the most famous for the phenomenon of former synagogue buildings surviving as churches."³

Although in general the practice of converting sacred sites of 'the Others' was continuously practiced in Iberia since Visigothic times, structurally this only affected synagogues under Christian rule with the end of the 14th century and occurred in the context of the persecution of the Jewish communities of Castile-Leon and Aragón in 1391/92. It is interesting to note that Ferrand Martines, the preacher who is considered the catalyst, if not the direct trigger, of the

¹ Conversion here means the entirety of the process of expropriation of a synagogue with subsequent re-functioning (consecration, sometimes reconstruction, demolition for new construction) and further use for one's own purposes. Most of these were sacred purposes, but some places were also profaned and used as dwellings or stables, for example. It is not always clear from the sources whether such conversions had already been planned before or with the expropriation of the synagogues. However, the sources that have survived and the abundance of conversions, which indicate an established and thus routine practice, suggest this. Thus, these conversions are generally—with exceptions, of course—assumed to be a targeted act.

² There are more studies on individual cases that deal with the conversion of a sacred sites, but overviews almost do not exist at all. Thus, e.g. there is no such work for the context of the Iberian Peninsula. Conversions are mentioned in overview works on synagogues such as Cantera Burgos or Luis Lacave, but are not explicitly addressed: Francisco Cantera Burgos, *Sinagogas Espanolas. Con Especial Estudio de la de Cordoba y la Toledana de El Transito*, Madrid 1955 und José Luis Lacave, *Juderías y Sinagogas Españolas*, Bilbao 1992.

On comprehensive studies of synagogue conversions in the Holy Roman Empire (HRE), e.g.: Röckelein, Hedwig, *Die grabstain, so vil tausent guldin wert sein. Vom Umgang der Christen mit Synagogen und jüdischen Friedhöfen im Mittelalter und am Beginn der Neuzeit*, in: *Aschkenas* 5.1 (1995), pp. 11–46; Minty, Mary, 'Judengasse' to Christian Quarter. The Phenomenon of the Converted Synagogue in the Late Medieval and Early Modern Holy Roman Empire, in: Bob Scriber/Trevor Johnson (ed.), *Popular Religion in Germany and Central Europe. 1400–1800*, London 1996, pp. 58–86; Mitchell Merback, *Pilgrimage & Pogrom. Violence, Memory, and Visual Culture at the Host-Miracle Shrines of Germany and Austria*, Chicago/London 2012.

On studies on individual cases in the HRE e.g. Allyson F. Creasman, *The Virgin Mary Against the Jews. Anti-Jewish Polemic in the Pilgrimage to the Schöne Maria of Regensburg, 1519–25*, in: *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 33. 4 (2002), pp. 963–980; Mitchell Merback, *The Vanquished Synagogue the Risen Host and the Grateful Dead at the Salvatorkirche in Passau*, in: *Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture* 1, 4 (2005), pp. 1–29; und Elzbieta Jastrzebowska, *The Church Atop a Synagogue in Chersonesos*, in: *Archaeologia* 62–63 (2011/12), pp. 61–73.

Again, no specific case study can be found considering the Iberian Peninsula, but conversions are often included in general studies on synagogues. See e.g. Bartolomé Herrero, Bonifacio, *La Sinagoga Mayor de Segovia y sus Propiedades Urbanas a Comienzos del Siglo XV*, in: *Sefarad* 72.1 (2012), pp. 191–225.

Interestingly, this is not the case in regard to conversions of mosques into churches, which Heather Ecker, Amy Remensnyder and Tobias Arera-Rütenik, e.g., have investigated more explicitly.

³ Barry L. Stiefel, *Jews and the Renaissance of Synagogue Architecture, 1450–1730*. London 2014, p. 13.

persecutions,⁴ had already been preaching explicitly against the synagogues and ordering their destruction since the 1380s: "I, Ferrand Martines, [...] order you the clerics and sacristans of Santolalla de la Sierra [...] to destroy within three hours the synagogue in which the enemies of God and the Church, called Jews, [...] practice their idolatry."⁵

If the many synagogue conversions carried out during and after 1391/92 can be understood as a consequence of the persecutions, the anti-synagogue sentiment that existed beforehand, expressed here in the statements handed down by Martines, can also be understood as driving for the developments that followed. The events of 1391/92, which are repeatedly understood as a turning point in Sephardic medieval history due to their transregionality and their dimensions of brutality,⁶ can therefore—as shall be argued—also be understood as a turning point in Christian synagogue politics in Castile and Aragón.

The synagogue, which fulfilled far more than purely religious functions and represented the central institution and often the central building of every Jewish community,⁷ was constantly instrumentalised in realpolitik by Christian Iberian authorities, aware of its importance for the Jewish side, as Yom Tov-Assis emphasises: "The decision of the king-counts concerning synagogues were generally in accord with their favourable policy towards the Jews and should be interpreted in the wider context of their attitudes towards the Jewish community."⁸ This 'favourable policy' consisted in particular in the permission to erect new synagogue buildings, which had consistently been prohibited by law since ancient times through different authorities, as well as the renovation of synagogues, which in turn was severely restricted by law.⁹ Conversely, at of the 14th century, an increasingly rigid policy and practice can be discerned. On the one hand it was certainly the case that there had been transformations of, attacks on, and the implementation of those restrictive laws regarding synagogues before; and equally, in the 15th century there were also new synagogue buildings that arose and synagogues

⁴ Little is known about the Archdeacon of Ecija, Ferrand Martines. The most detailed study of Martines so far dates from the 19th century: Henry Charles Lea, Ferrand Martinez and the Massacres of 1391, in: *The American Historical Review* 1,2 (1896), pp. 209–219. However, Maya S. Irish also dealt with him in more detail in the context of her research on the persecutions of 1391/92: Maya Soifer Irish, *Toward 1391: The anti-Jewish preaching of Ferrant Martinez in Seville*, in: Johnathan Adams/Cordelia Hess (ed.), *The Medieval Roots of Antisemitism: Continuities and Discontinuities From the Middle Ages to the Present Day*, London 2018, pp. 306–319. A monograph by her on the persecutions is in progress (see her website at Rice University: <https://profiles.rice.edu/faculty/maya-soifer-irish> (last opened 26.10.22)).

⁵ "Yo, Ferrand Martines [...] mando á vos los clérigos e sacristanes de Santolalla de la Sierra [...] ffasta tres oras derroquedes la casa Sinagoga, en que los enemigos de Dios é de la Iglesia, que se llama Judíos, (...) ffasen su idolatría." (Transl. by the author), AHN, CLERO-REGULAR-SECULAR, 7215, n° 7. Also edited with minor mistakes in Jitzhak Baer, *Die Juden im christlichen Spanien. Erster Teil: Urkunden und Regesten, Vol. II*, Berlin 1929, pp. 211ff. and José Amador de los Ríos, *Historia social, política y religiosa de los judíos en España y Portugal. Vol. 2*, Madrid 1876, pp. 531ff.

⁶ Cf. e.g. Angus MacKay, *Popular Movements and Pogroms in Fifteenth-Century Castile*, in: *Past & Present* 55 (1972), pp. 33-67, here: p. 39.

⁷ See Yom-Tov Assis, *Synagogues in Medieval Spain*, in: *Jewish Art* 18 (1992), pp. 6–29.

⁸ Yom-Tov Assis, *Golden Age of Aragonese Jewry: Community and Society in the Crown of Aragón. 1213–1327*, Liverpool 1997, pp. 210.

⁹ Cf. Simon Paulus, *Die Architektur der Synagoge im Mittelalter. Überlieferung und Bestand*, Petersberg 2007, pp. 33–38.

continued to exist. On the other hand, however, physical attacks on the synagogue increased in the form of destruction, damage and conversion. Additionally, one can discern a shift in regard to the actors. Whereas previously the aggressors had usually been the local population or regional clerics and attempts had been made by royalty to protect and defend the synagogues, increasingly it was the kings themselves who appropriated the synagogues by failing to help or by issuing laws and orders themselves which directly or indirectly caused different kinds of appropriations, among them conversions.¹⁰

The analysis of the conversion of synagogues into churches in the late 14th and early 15th centuries in the kingdoms of Castile-Leon and Aragón is the subject of my doctoral project. The project thus aims to contribute to the study of this still little researched topic. From both the Jewish and Christian perspective, the synagogue possessed numerous functions and was highly symbolically charged on inter-, intra- and extra-religious levels. The analytical focus on these transformations can therefore also be understood as a lens in whose focal point these three levels merge.

¹⁰ See, e.g., the royal persecutions in Castile-León and Aragón in 1391/92 which could not only be prevented from happening in most places, but also the following investigations concerning the perpetrators and their punishment afterwards were scarce. Cf., e.g., z. B. Benjamin R. Gampel, *Anti-Jewish Riots in the Crown of Aragón and the Royal Response, 1391–1392*, Cambridge 2016. See in respect to the enactment of laws the laws of Ayllon, which intended the social and spatial exclusion of both the Jewish and Muslim populations. The resettlement of the Jewish population in neighbourhoods separated from the Christian population often led to the destruction and conversion of synagogues. Cf. Carolina M. Ley Losada, *Divina y Ley Terrena. Antijudaísmo y Estrategias de Conversión en la Campaña Castellana de San Vicente Ferrer (1411–1412)*, in: *Hispania Sacra* 65 (2013), pp. 603–640. Vicente Ferrer, who was ordered by Juan II (1405–1454) or his regent mother Catherine of Lancaster (probably 1373–1418) to enforce those laws and was himself involved in the Disputation of Tortosa, which took place in Aragón a short time later, again led to attacks on synagogues through his preaching. Cf. *ibid.*; and Carolina M. Ley Losada, *Powerful Words. St Vincent Ferrer's Preaching and the Jews in Medieval Castile*, in: Thomas V. Cohen/ Lesley K. Twomey (ed.), *Spoken Word and Social Practice. Orality in Europe (1400–1700)*, Leiden 2015, pp. 200–221 and Pedro Cátedra García, *Sermón, sociedad y literatura en la Edad Media. San Vicente Ferrer en Castilla (1411–1412)*. Estudio bibliográfico, literario y edición de textos inéditos, Salamanca 1994. A tightening of the regulations on synagogues can also be found explicitly in a bull of Benedict XIII (1328 or 1342/43–1423) from the year 1415, which in terms of content differs only slightly from previous bulls and decrees (s. fn. 9), however in terms of language it differed significantly, the tone become much sharper. S. the edited bull in: *Amador de los Ríos*, Vol. 2 1876, pp. 549f. and cf. Paulus 2007, p. 37.