

"See Jerusalem and die": The Ashkenazi widow community in Jerusalem in the Mameluke and Early Ottoman periods

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Our knowledge of the history of Jewish society in Jerusalem in the Mameluke and Early Ottoman periods is largely based on a limited variety of historical information – halakhic literature (responsa), certificates, legal deeds, letters and so on. An in-depth review of these documents clearly shows that most of the figures active in public and religious community life – lobbyists, shlichei mitzvah (emissaries carrying out religious duties on behalf of others), rabbis and others – are males. However, the fact remains that the actual number of Jewish women in Jerusalem in the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was apparently rather high, and their contribution to life in Jewish Jerusalem has not earned its due recognition.

One of the reasons for this large number of women was the phenomenon of elderly women who came to Jerusalem in their twilight years specifically in order to die rather than live there. The presence of elderly women in the old city of Jerusalem was a salient feature throughout the ages, usually both Ashkenazi and Sephardi widows, who came to Jerusalem after having fulfilled their traditional role of giving birth to children and then marrying them off, or after they had lost their families. A select few sought to embark on a new chapter in their family life due to their personal predicament and the limited supply of men. Their objective was to spend the remaining period of their life in the holy city and to be buried there so as to benefit from the resurrection of the dead at the end of days.

In this article, we try to shed light on the world of the elderly women who came to live in Jerusalem. Based on the scant sources available, we shall attempt to glean information regarding their economic situation, their employment and living accommodation. The main focus of the article will deal with one of the most difficult challenges facing the community leaders during those periods of time – saving the estate

funds of those women who died without heirs, and according to the local Islamic sharia law, such sums were destined to be deposited in the state coffers.