TWO MEDIEVAL WOMEN

Dulcea of Worms

Dulcea of Worms came from the elite leadership class of medieval German Jewry. She was the daughter of a cantor and the wife of a major rabbinic figure, Rabbi Eleazar ben Judah of Worms (1165–1230), also known as the Roke'ah (the Perfumer), after the title of one of his most famous works (*Sefer ha-Roke'ah*).

Dulcea and her husband were members of a small pietistic circle of Jews, the Hasidei Ashkenaz, that developed following the devastations of the First Crusade of 1096. The documents of this movement include many mystical works, as well as a volume reflecting their ethical concerns, *Sefer Hasidim* (The Book of the Pious), an important historical source for everyday Jewish life in medieval Ashkenaz.

Among R. Eleazar ben Judah's surviving writings are two accounts, one in prose and one in poetry, that describe the lives and the deaths of his wife Dulcea, and their daughters, Bellette and Hannah, who were murdered in November 1196.

According to these texts, two armed men, who had apparently gained entry to the family dwelling, set upon those present, including R. Eleazar, his wife, two daughters, at least one son, a number of students, and a junior teacher. Many scholars have assumed the attackers were Crusaders. There were, however, no massed Crusader forces in Germany at this time. While the two miscreants may have worn Crusader markings, they appear to have attacked the family out of criminal motives.

Dulcea was a moneylender who supported her household financially and she was probably known to have valuable objects in her home. These assaults did not go unpunished. The local authorities, in accordance with the German Emperor's mandate of protecting the Jews of his realm, quickly captured and executed at least one of the men.

In both his prose and poetic laments, Eleazar describes Dulcea's economic activities. A capable businesswoman, she was apparently entrusted with the funds of neighbors which she pooled in order to lend at profitable rates of interest on which she received commissions. She also managed an extensive household including her husband's students and at least one teacher.

In addition, she was renowned for her needlework. Dulcea is credited with preparing gut thread and sewing together books and forty Torah scrolls and is said to have spun thread for other religious objects. She is also said to have prepared candles for synagogue use.

Dulcea had a more extensive Jewish education than most women of her milieu. She is among several medieval Jewish women who are described as leading prayers for other women. Her husband wrote, “In all the cities she taught women, enabling their ‘pleasant’ intoning of songs.” In her prominent role as rabbi’s wife, Dulcea took on other communal responsibilities relating to women. She is described as adorning brides and bringing them to the wedding canopy in honor.

As a respected investment broker, Dulcea may have been involved in arranging matches and negotiating the financial arrangements which accompanied them. She is also said to have bathed the dead and to have sewn their shrouds, acts considered particularly meritorious in Jewish tradition.

Dulcea was teaching her daughters to follow in her footsteps; their father mentions not only their needlework skills, but also their knowledge of Hebrew prayers and melodies. In everything, as the Roke’ah puts it in the poetic lament, Dulcea was concerned to “fulfil her Creator’s commandments.”

R. Eleazar’s final words of praise for Dulcea are that she rejoiced to perform her husband’s will and never angered him, an expression of his fundamental agreement with the rabbinic view that a woman earns merit by enabling her male relatives to study and pray.

Dulcea is revered above all else for facilitating the spiritual activities of the men of her household. In the final phrase of the poetic lament, R. Eleazar envisions his beloved wife wrapped in the eternal life of Paradise, a worthy reward for the deeds upon which so many were dependent. While this idealized portrait certainly contains formulaic elements, there can be no doubt of its author’s deep grief at the loss of his wife and daughters. Although the Roke’ah’s memorializations of Dulcea, Bellette, and Hannah are framed by male assumptions about what constitutes admirable female behavior, they nonetheless

provide important insights into Jewish women's lives in an era from which independent female voices do not survive.

Pulcelina of Blois

A 12th-century female moneylender to the court of Blois, Pulcelina was implicated in the first ritual murder accusation in France and was burnt at the stake along with her two daughters and 30 other co-religionists in 1171.

These events are documented in a variety of Hebrew sources, including five surviving letters, a chronicle, two memorial lists, and eight poems; this literary productivity indicates the degree to which this tragedy shocked the Jews of Ashkenaz.

In his account in Sefer Zekhirah ("Book of Remembrance"), the chronicler and liturgical poet Ephraim ben Jacob of Bonn (1132–c. 1200) used the verb ohav ("love") to describe the affection of Count Thibaut of Blois (1152–1191) for Pulcelina; most historians have assumed that the two were involved in a romantic relationship.

This theory has been challenged by S. Einbinder (1998), who suggests that ohav in this instance implies that the count "favored" Pulcelina as a lender and perhaps as a trusted financial advisor.

Einbinder believes that Thibaut's wife, Countess Alix, who is described as hating Pulcelina and swaying the count against her, was motivated not by sexual jealousy but because she herself, and others close to her, owed significant sums to Pulcelina and resented her influence over the Count.

The surviving documents make it clear that Pulcelina behaved arrogantly and was widely disliked by members of Thibaut's court. That a ritual murder accusation could be brought against Pulcelina, and Blois Jewry, when there was no corpse and no missing child, also indicates the level of animosity her position of power had generated. Ephraim wrote that once she was arrested, she was prevented from speaking with the count for fear that she might convince him to change his mind and release the Jews.

Although Jews from other communities attempted to ransom the prisoners, they were unable to offer sufficient funds to prevent their martyrdom. While in many ways this catastrophe represents a cautionary instance of the fall of a court Jew, with tragic consequences for the larger community, Pulcelina's gender and the possibility that she had an intimate relationship with Count Thibaut give the story added dimensions as an extreme example of the independence and entrepreneurship of Jewish women in Ashkenaz in the 11th and 12th centuries.