RECIFE, VICUS JUDEORUM: THE SPACE OF JUDAISM IN DUTCH RECIFE
Master degree project
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My project focuses on the spatial question of the Jewish community in Dutch Recife (1630-1654), its parallel with the building of urban space and its relevance for the social interaction of Jews with the other groups that divided that space. I am interested in comprehending the relations between the model of society expected by the Dutch urban culture and the daily practices of Recife. Concerning that, I observe the social processes of citizenship formation, and how the Jews inserted in those processes, it is, how the produced their space: how did they fit in the rules concerning religious practices, how they interacted with their burgers acquaintances in commerce and public institutions like the city Chamber and civic militias, and, specially, how was the process of physical space production by the Jewish community. I detain myself on the urban history of Recife, looking for understanding the processes of the construction of the town together with the existing idea of community.

The “Regulation of government of conquered squares”\textsuperscript{1} of the West Indies Company (WIC), dated from 1629, foresaw the extension to Brazil of the religious freedom right juridical, but not always effectively, guaranteed in the United Provinces of Netherlands. Many Jews came as soldiers of the Company since the conquest of Brazil in 1630. Since 1635, with the fall of the Portuguese resistance in Pernambuco, the Company begun to authorize the coming of colonists to Brazil. Among the Jews established in Amsterdam, dozens requested permission to change to Brazil. The most of them had few possessions, and had to ask for exemption of fare, immigrating with their families, while other were preceded by agents and quickly acquired real state in Pernambuco, such as sugar mills, urban properties or rights over taxes collection\textsuperscript{2}.

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\textsuperscript{1} REGIMENTO do Governo das Praças Conquistadas ou que forem conquistadas nas Índias Occidentaes. [1629] in: RIAHGP. Tomo V, nº 31. Recife: Typographia Universal, Outubro de 1886. pp. 289-310

The most of immigrants who embarked in Dutch ports facing the painful crossing of Atlantic had the port of Recife as their destiny. On the small isthmus that had been only a appendix of the village of Olinda, holding the sugar warehouses and a small church, the “sad burg which the nobles of Olinda should cross on tiptoe”\(^3\), with the humble denomination of “povo” (“people” or “village”)\(^4\) symbolically started its urban genesis. Olinda, miniature of Lisbon, was burned out by the Dutch in 1631\(^5\), becoming a symbol of resistance against the Flemish, and, in a certain way, symbol of the native feeling of Pernambuco aristocracy, or ‘açucarocracia’ (“sugarcracy”)\(^6\). With all the glances turned to Recife, it arose there a commercial entrepot, a trade city\(^7\), mosaic of European, American and African people. Diverse religious denominations shared an urban space comparable to a neighborhood of a Dutch city. Sobrados (two or more story buildings) with even four stories produced narrow corridors where this population squeezed. The coeval testimony of Pierre Moreau reveals:

“The Jews were much more worried about the instruction of theirs in their believing, but all, indifferently, took a lascivious and scandalous life; Jews, Christians, Portuguese’s, Dutch’s, English’s, French’s, Germans, Blacks, Brasilianers [native Indians], Tapuias [idem], Mulatts, Mamelucos and Crioulos co-inhabited with promiscuity, not to talk about the incest’s and sins against nature, for which many Portuguese’s were condemned to death and executed” \(^8\)

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\(^3\) MELLO, José Antônio Gonçalves de. Tempo dos Flamengos. 4a ed. Rio de Janeiro, Topbooks, 2001. P. 39

\(^4\) Or dorp, in the Dutch documents, which regard the same meaning: village. This denomination is found in famous maps of Recife, of 1631 (Grondt Teyckeningh van het Eylandt Antoni Vaaz, het Recife..., by Andreas Drewisch, found in the Algemeen Rijksarchief in the Hague) or 1639 (Caerte van de Haven van Pharnambouque, published in “Atlas Vingboons”, found in Instituto Arqueológico Histórico e Geográfico Pernambucano). It is interesting that in this second one, being it a plan of urbanization o the Santo Antônio Island, neighbor to the isthmus, the name dorp is kept, since according to the census of 1654, Recife reached almost 4000 inhabitants, while the buildings on Santo Antônio island, which had the name of stadt Mauritia (Maurice city), didn’t house 700 inhabitants. The references not only don’t correspond to the appropriate status of the two nucleuses, but also reflect the expectation of urbanization and development of the island, personal project of Count von Nassau. The term “city” may not be adequate to Recife, if compared with the demographic standard in Europe at that time, and thus “village” (“povo”) or “square”, common in the documents, might be more appropriated. Nevertheless, Recife became in a juridical sense a city, and we shall use this term to refer to it.


The comment of Moreau about Jewish organization (the concern with instruction) corresponds to the fast process of community organization of the Jewish population of Recife. They were already all members of the same community in Amsterdam, belonging to a same cultural-religious Jewish tradition, that of Sefardim. In 1636 they were already organizing religious worship in the house of a private, the rich merchant Duarte Saraiva. In 1642 they had build the Kahal Zur Israel synagogue, the first synagogue of American continent, counting as official one of the most promising names of Amsterdam’s rabbinate, Isaac Aboab da Fonseca, who came to be the first Hebrew author of the New World.

The Jews of Dutch Recife reached a economical and demographical prominence. Although there are no precise data over the number of members of the community, the historians opine numbers between 340 and 5000 members. Even in the smallest number, they would represent 25% of white civil population of Recife in 1645. At the same period, Amsterdam counted 140.000 inhabitants and no more than 2000 Jews.

An important part of sugar and slave trade, of small commerce in fairs and stores – activity moreover prohibited to Jews in the Netherlands – and brokerage business were in the hands of Israelite professionals. It generated complaints to government for the part of Calvinists merchants and preachers. But many things were favorable to the Jews. Members of the community had become important in the society, attending to Nassau’s court, and also to burgers associations, taking part on militaries expeditions, serving as diplomats. In the end, the official restrictions imposed to Jews were ephemeral and they could enjoy a freedom “so big that was not to be found anywhere else”, in the words of preacher Soler, official of the French Church of Maurice city.

The Jewish life in Recife finished with the expelling of the Dutch in 1654. The most of the members of Jewish nation returned to Amsterdam. Many came to take part on the Dutch colonial enterprises in the Caribbean. A group of 23 ex-inhabitants of Recife

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10 Kahal Zur Israel, in English, Congregation Rock of Israel. Zur (rock) is likely a reference to Recife (reef).

founded in the colony of New Amsterdam, in Manhattan island, the first Jewish Congregation in North America, the *Shearith Israel*, or Reminiscence of Israel.

In this context, my project focuses the spatial matter of the Jewish community, its parallel with the construction of space in Recife, and its importance to the social interaction of the Jews with the other diverse groups that shared that space.

Since 2001 I have been working at the Jewish Historical Archive of Pernambuco, in the development of researches about the Jewish community of the Dutch period. I have taken part on many academic meetings and in the production of national and international exhibitions over the thematic. I have also given conferences and lectures over my research.

There is a sizeable bibliography over the Jewish community in Recife. But the published monographs are of general aspect, making no dialog with history theory, consisting on quantitative and descriptive works. Very little is known about the place of the Jewish Recife in the World, it is, the historiography has such a restricted scale, that gives little emphasis on the fact that Recife was an Atlantic entrepot, melting pot of the three Atlantic continents, idiosyncratic for the Jewish world, given the situation of Judaism in Europe and Islam in the 17th century.

Brazilian historians have been producing many works on the New-Christian or Marranos, the descendents of forcibly converted Jews who kept observing aspects of Judaism. Nevertheless there are few new works on the institutionalized community that existed in the 17th. Up to the classics, the main work on the thematic is that of professor José Antônio Gonsalves de Mello, *Gente da Nação* (Recife, 1987), which brings an impressive volume of collected documentation, being 320 pages of the book dedicated to the Dutch period. He has made a discussion with many authors who preceded him, with emphasis on the factual aspect. About the space matter, even though Mello have written many about the Dutch urban experience in Recife, he makes very few relations about the construction and use of the urban space by the Jews. It is also small the dialog with the Jewish situation in Europe at that time, or with new perspectives of historical research that allows us to look at that extensive documentation through concepts such as discursive analysis or power relations.
North-American authors have also researched the Jewish life in Pernambuco. Arnold Wiznitzer has published *Jews in Colonial Brazil*\(^{12}\) in which he writes both about New-Christians and the Jewish community in Dutch Brazil. Dr. Wiznitzer makes many commentaries on the legal position of the Jews and their struggle for acquiring *citizenship* in the Dutch colonies. This theoretical approach is affiliated to the researches of American authors over the colonial Jewry in North-America. About this subject there is a large production of articles in the *Publications of American Jewish Historical Society*, from Baltimore. In this magazines appears many articles about the Dutch Brazil, where we can underline names like M. Kayserling, Herbert I. Bloom and Samuel Oppenheim, whose works are used by Gonsalves de Mello and Arnold Wiznitzer, this last one also contributor to the *Publications*. Although Brazilian researchers like Mello and Egon and Fried Wolff have made many corrections on the North-American works, it is still necessary to make a deeper investigation on the legal situation of the Jews in Dutch Brazil.

During 17\(^{th}\) century, in an Europe full of religious conflicts, there were no cities where the Jews were completely pulverized on the urban space: by their on option as also by the option of the municipalities where they were established, there was always a “juderia”, a “gheto”, a “Vicus Judeorum”\(^{13}\), it is, a Jewish quarter. This allowed the circumscription of cultural practices to a fixed space, cooling off the tensions. After 1620, in Holland, there were no more religious persecutions\(^{14}\), but every city with a Jewish colony presented a distinctive denomination in the Jewish quarter: there was a way called *jodenstraat*, literally, street of the Jews. In Recife, besides this principle was known, its practice was not effective.

The fortress-city had three gates: the *waterpoort*, or water gate, at east, in front of the harbor; the *pontpoort*, or ferry gate, at west, on the shore of Beberibe river, where in 1642 was built a bridge.; and the *lantpoort*, or land gate, at north of the isthmus, in the way for Olinda. Excepting for the sea and river entries, the access to Recife by land, the only

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\(^{13}\) *Juderia* is the Spanish designation for the Jewish quarter. The word *gheto* is linked to the establishment, in 1516, of a Jewish quarter in Ghetto Nuovo, or New Fusion, in Venice. *Vici Judeorum* is the medieval latin term for the Jewish quarter. (EBAN, 1973: 185)

one for who came from the continent before the construction of the aforementioned bridge, 
made that a walker – coming in or out the city – passed directly by the Street of the Jews. 
At both sides of the street, the residences of the most wealth members of the Jewish 
community; at the same street, the first building of public attendance of the city to be seen 
was the Kahal Zur Israel Synagogue. In no city in Europe it was possible to see a 
synagogue in a main street. In Recife, it happened that the synagogue was located in the main street of the city, called, in half of its route, Street of the Jews. The traffic thought this 
street was, therefore, inevitable: it gave access to the market out of the “land gate”, to 
Olinda and the rural area and to many fortifications. Nevertheless, given the tinny urban 
space, the Israelites spread on every street: the miniature of Jewish Quarter didn’t contain 
all the Jewish population.

Over this matter we ask how did the non-Jews react to such a prominence of the 
Jewish social space when compared with the European model. Which elements, in Dutch 
Recife, made possible to the community a social traffic –especially economical – and a 
more flexible and dynamic spatial organization than in European cities? What is the idea of 
community and in which way does the pulverization of Israelites individuals in the urban 
space affects the communal organization? In which measure the constant traffic of non-
Jews in the jodenstraat modifies the cultural practices in the spaces of Judaism? What is the 
effect of it in the conception of territory of the Jewish community?

The space of the Street of the Jews was conquered through a process very different 
from that usual one in Europe, it is, the state grant or the purchase of buildings of a certain 
area to the settlement of the Jewish Quarter. In the case of Recife, the Jewish community 
was largely responsible for the very construction of the physical ground where they built 
their residences and synagogue. Through landfills, they enlarged the west bank of the 
isthmus, supported for the public policy which warranted the access to the grounds 
conquered from the river. I understand that this policy was related to a matter of Dutch 
mentality, it is, that of a patriotic discourse regarding the conquest of physical space to the

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15 The archeological diggings carried out, between 1999 and 2000, in the building of the Kahal Zur Israel Synagogue, revealed this, through the rescue of the material of the landfill and the location of the original bank of Beberibe river in the front threshold of the building, what indicates that all the ground was result of landfill. See ALBUQUERQUE, Marcos. Projeto Escavação Arqueológica da Sinagoga Kahal Zur Israel: Relatório Parcial. Recife, mimeo. Abril de 2000.

sea, via the polders and canals. “God made Earth, but the Dutch made the Netherlands” states the saying. It is a discursive legitimacy of the access to the land, analyzed by Simon Schama in his *The Embarrassment of the Riches*, in which he comes out with the concept of *Moral Geography*.

The term regards a notion about collective actions in a struggle against the floods and for the conquest of new land from the sea, while at the same time the Dutch political autonomy was taking shape. “The war for independence”, explains Schama, “happened simultaneously to a particularly fierce fight against the sea”\(^1\). This is the moral summoned by Barleus when informs us that “since they started, however, to rule Brazil the Dutch, dominators of lands and waters, it was suitable to choose Recife and Antônio Vaz Island for the seat of government.”\(^2\) [my underline]. This moral that legitimates the access to the land, through the collective action was present at the people who disembarked in Pernambuco and in the discourses over the process of land filing in Recife. These official discourses, tied to the aforementioned concept, offer us a different optics to analyze the legitimacy of spaces of Judaism face to the State and society.

Therefore, which are the effects of this *moral geography* in the construction of a Jewish space? Does its insertion in the process of space conquest legitimate their social insertion? The conquer of a social space – and the physical settlement in community spaces – of the Jews did not happen through a erudite debate, but through a social *practice* that made them essential to the development of the colony especially within the urban space.

The first official recognition of Judaism, however, was not the space of religious attendance, but he space of death. The same way as in Amsterdam, the municipality and the Jewish community worried namely about the Jewish place for dying. The first documented reference to the cemetery is from 1639. This way, it was granted the Protestant and Jewish interests, both intolerant with the burring of apostates in their consecrated space. Out of the urban area, according to the Jewish law, the cemetery was practically a advanced post of

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\(^2\) BARLÉU, Gaspar. *História dos feitos recentemente praticados durante oito anos no Brasil*. Belo Horizonte: Editora Itatiaia; São Paulo, Editora da Universidade de São Paulo, 1974. P. 154. In 1631, one year after the conquer of the capital of Pernambuco, Olinda, the Dutch burned this village and started a new town in the port of Recife and its neighbor island, Antônio Vaz. Recife came to be the capital of all the Dutch conquer, called New Holland, including the captaincies of Pernambuco, Itamaracá, Paraíba, Rio Grande, Ceará and Maranhão.
the urbanizing practices of Recife, creating effects that reached the non-Jewish population. Our question is to understand in which way the conquest of this space reinforced the institutionalization and pulverization of Judaism and Jews in Recife’s space.

To think about the spatial relations I work with several concepts. One way to understand space is found in Michel de Certeau, who understands space as a “practiced site” 19. Our discussion starts in the matter of physical space and its symbolism, but the spaces of the Jews – the cemetery, the synagogue, the Street of the Jews, the market – are carried with a symbolic value and practices that are vital to the comprehension of the ways by which they are represented in the analyzed documents. The space of the synagogue, physically a sobrado building, is a cultural reference that maintains a great number of power relations.

To think of the relations with state, we state that the politics in 17th century, in which we can put the government of WIC in Brazil, is connected to the notion of governmentality. The function of this state is not to serve to the Prince, in a mixture of the social heritage to the personal heritage of the sovereign, but to make an economical manage of the society 20. Pragmatically, there was no place for religious dispute in this State. This concept offers us a key for characterize the posture – usually with tolerance and mediation – of the Dutch government in what concerns the Jews.

About the community space, I use the notion of territory, seen as space controlled by certain power relations 21. We understand that this notion applies to the communal organization of a Jewish neighborhood when ruled by regulations, when charged with a religious symbolism of power exercise, when it legitimates the status of certain members of the community through their economical influence and capacity of bargain face to the authorities.

These relations must be seen under a point of view of the lens through which the Christian saw the Jews, many times with a strong influence of anti-Semitism, or anti-Judaism, since there is anachronism in the term. Poliacov explains that in the societies where prevailed religions with origins in Judaism (Christianity and Islam) there is a

21 Idem, p. 157)
tendency to the permanence of institutionalized Judaism, where usually the Jews played a part disproportional to their number, in despite of – and in fact, in function of – the existing tensions. In the case of Chinese or Indian Jewish communities, there happened assimilation or a very small difference\textsuperscript{22}. The Dutch Calvinist tolerance to Judaism was a common practice at 17\textsuperscript{th} century. In the case of Recife, my work suggests that the tensions between Calvinists and Jews\textsuperscript{23} were more related to matters of practical order – economical and plastics – than theological.

Leading with the sources, I am attentive to the discourses; I have the caution of identifying projections and expectations informed by a system of glances existing in the accounts over the Jewish community – the most of them very hostile – and in those produced by members of it – mostly charged with a pietism characteristic of the coeval literary production. I observe the cultural lens that produced lineage of discourses about the Jews – which, uncritically taken, have produced historiographical discourses.

The conquest of physical space in Dutch Recife is well documented, not only by the manuscripts registers, but also in the Dutch cartographic letters and iconography. There are documents from 1630 to 1654 which allows us to describe discursive and non-discursive practices over the process of land fills, buildings and project of the town. There are important studies over the theme carried out by brazilian researchers.\textsuperscript{24}

Arnold Wiznitzer has published the Haskamot\textsuperscript{25}, the regulations and minute book, which contains the resolutions of Zur Israel congregation between 1648 and 1654. Through them it is possible to follow many moments of the practices of the community related to the spaces of the synagogue and the cemetery, the bargains with the society and with the State, as well as the intern dynamic of the community. Once it is possible to know also the official resolutions over the Jews, we can follow from the registers of the congregation, its reaction to the State politics.


The “Inventário dos Prédios” (Buildings Inventory) allows one to analyze the
distribution of the Jews in the urban area of Recife, coming up with a cartography of their
pulverization, their neighborhood, among other aspects. Complementing the
historiographical knowledge, the archaeological excavations carried out in the
neighborhood of Old Recife have permitted a better comprehension about the division of
urban space by social class and the insertion of the Israelites in this division, besides their
material culture, revealing habits not accessible through the documents, such as the
production of the Street of the Jews via land fills.

In what regards the manuscripts, there is a large documentation that counts with
Portuguese-Brazilian accounts, official accounts and minutes of the Dutch government,
replete of details about the political-administrative, economical and social day-to-day of the
town. In Recife we have access to Manuscripts from Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, Lisbon, available in the Laboratório de Ensino e Pesquisa em História of the Universidade
Federal de Pernambuco. More important is the José Hygino Collection of Instituto
Arqueológico Histórico e Geográfico Pernambucano. Manuscripts copied by José
Hygino Pereira, in the end of 19th century, consisting on the following collections:

- Dagelijksche Notulen der Hooge Raden in Brazilië (Daily Notes of the High
  Council of Brazil). 12 vols. 1625-54
- Brieven en Papieren uit Brazilië (Letters and papers from Brazil). 15 vols. 1630-
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Also are very important the many chronicles and diaries of the period that brings a
large number of details about the social and cultural relations in New Holland. These
documents have been vastly used, but a more accurate problematic is able to make them
speak more.

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26 INVENTÁRIO das armas e petrechos belicos que os holandeses deixaram em Pernambuco e dos predios
edificados ou reparados até 1654. Recife, Imprensa Oficial, 1940.
27 Oversea Historical Archive, Lisbon.
28 Laboratory of Education and Research in History of the Federal University of Pernambuco, Recife
29 Archaeological, Historical and Geographical Institute of Pernambuco, Recife
30 Among the more important: CALADO, Frei Manuel. [Lisboa, 1648]. O Valeroso Lucideno e triunfo da
liberdade. 4ª ed. Recife, Fundarpe, Diretoria de Assuntos Culturais, 1985. DIÁRIO de Hendrik Haex (1645-
Pérfidos designios dos Portugueses do Brasil, descobertos em junho de 1645, e do mais que se passou até 28