

The **Romaniote Jews** or **Romaniotes** (Greek: Ῥωμανιῶτες, *Rhōmaniōtes*; Hebrew: רומניוטים, *Romanyotim*) are an ethnic Jewish community native to the Eastern Mediterranean. They are one of the oldest Jewish communities in existence and the oldest Jewish community in Europe. Their distinct language was Judaeo-Greek, a Greek dialect that contained Hebrew along with some Aramaic and Turkish words, but they now speak modern Greek or the languages of their new home countries. They derived their name from the old name for the people of the Byzantine Empire, Romaioi. Large communities were located in Thebes, Ioannina, Chalcis, Corfu, Arta, Preveza, Volos, Patras, Corinth, and on the islands of Zakynthos, Lesbos, Chios, Samos, Rhodes, and Cyprus, among others. The Romaniotes are historically distinct and still remain distinct from the Sephardim, who settled in Ottoman Greece after the 1492 expulsion of the Jews from Spain.

Romaniotes

Ρωμανιώτες



Members of the Romaniote Greek Jewish Community of [Volos](#): rabbi [Moshe Pesach](#) (front left) with his sons (back)

Regions with significant populations

 <a href="#">Greece</a>	1,500+
 <a href="#">Israel</a>	45,000
 <a href="#">United States</a>	6,500
 <a href="#">Turkey</a>	500

Languages

[Greek](#), [Hebrew](#), [Yevanic](#), [Turkish](#)

Religion

[Judaism](#), [Irreligion](#), [Atheism](#)

Related ethnic groups

[Greeks](#), [Constantinopolitan Karaites](#)

A majority of the Jewish population of Greece was killed in the [Holocaust](#) after [Axis powers occupied Greece](#) during [World War II](#). They deported most of the Jews to [Nazi concentration camps](#). After the war, a majority of the survivors emigrated to [Israel](#), the United States, and Western Europe. Today there are still functioning Romaniote Synagogues in [Chalkis](#) which represents the oldest Jewish congregation on European ground, in Ioannina, Athens, New York and Israel.

## Name

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The name *Romaniote* refers to the medieval [Eastern Roman Empire](#), which included the territory of modern Greece, and was for centuries the homeland of this Jewish group. Historically, the Empire was commonly referred to as *Rhomania* (Ῥωμανία) and its Christian citizens as *Rhomaioi*, while the Greek-speaking Jews were called *Romaniotes*; both terms have the meaning of the [Demonym](#) *Romans*. *Further Information:* [Ῥωμαῖοι](#).

## History

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[Moshe Pesach](#), Chief [Rabbi](#) of the Romaniote [Greek Jewish](#) community of [Volos](#), Greece in 1939.



Mosaic floor of a Jewish synagogue in Greece, built 300 AD, [Aegina](#).



[Kehila Kedosha Janina](#), New York City.

Jews have lived in Greece long before the [Second Temple](#) era. The Greek Judaism dates back over 2,300 years to the time of [Alexander the Great](#).<sup>[1]</sup> The earliest reference to a [Greek Jew](#) is an inscription dated c. 300–250 BC, found in [Oropos](#), a small coastal town between [Athens](#) and [Boeotia](#), which refers to "Moschos, son of Moschion the Jew", who may have been a [slave](#).<sup>[2]</sup>

On the Island [Aegina](#) a [Hellenistic Jewish](#) synagogue was discovered in 1829 in the capital of the Island, near the ancient military port. The synagogue was originally discovered by the Scottish German historian [Ludwig Ross](#), from the royal court of King [Otto of Greece](#). The floor was covered in order to be protected and was studied again by Thiersch in 1901, Furtwängler in 1904, E. Sukenik in 1928, and finally by the German archaeologist Dr. G. Welter, in 1932. The studies were completed by the National Archaeological Service. Based on the quality of the floor's mosaic, the building is believed to have been constructed in the 4th century AD (300-350 AD) and was used until the 7th century AD. The mosaic floor of the synagogue still survives (see photo on the left side) and is made up of multi-colored [tesserae](#), that create the impression of a carpet, in a geometric pattern of blue,

gray, red and white. Two Greek inscriptions were found in front of the synagogue's entrance, on the western side of the building. Today, only part of the synagogue's mosaic floor is extant, and it has been moved from its original location to the courtyard of the island's Archaeological Museum. In 1977 another ancient Synagogue was discovered in Athens, the [Synagogue in the Agora of Athens](#), which may be the Synagogue that [Paul the Apostle](#) preached. Inscriptions in the [Samaritan](#) and the [Greek alphabet](#) found in Thessaloniki may originate from [Samaritan](#) synagogues. Concurrently the oldest synagogue found in the [diaspora](#) is also the oldest Samaritan synagogue; it is the [Delos Synagogue](#) which has been discovered so far on the island of [Delos](#), with an inscription dated between 250 and 175 BCE<sup>[3][4]</sup>

The Romaniotes are Greek Jews, distinct from both [Ashkenazim](#) and [Sephardim](#), who trace back their history to the times of the Greek-speaking [Byzantine Jews](#) and can be subdivided in a wider sense in a Rabbanite community and in the Greco-Karaite community of the [Constantinopolitan Karaites](#) which still survives to this day.<sup>[5][6][7][8]</sup> A Romaniote oral tradition tells that the first Jews arrived in [Ioannina](#) shortly after the destruction of the [Second Temple](#) in [Jerusalem](#) in 70 AD.

Before the migration of the Ashkenazi and the Sephardi Jews into the Balkans and Eastern Europe, the Jewish culture in these areas consisted primarily of Romaniote Jews.<sup>[9]</sup>

The Romaniote [Rites](#) represent those of the Greek-speaking Jews of the Byzantine (or former Byzantine) empire, ranging from southern Italy (in a narrower sense the [Apulian](#), the [Calabrian](#) and the [Sicilian](#) Jewish communities) in the west, to much of Turkey in the East, Crete to the south, Crimea (the [Krymchaks](#)) to the north and the Jews of the early medieval [Balkans](#) and [Eastern Europe](#).<sup>[10]</sup>

The [Sefer Yosippon](#) was written down in the 10th century in Byzantine [Southern Italy](#) by the Greek-speaking Jewish community there. [Judah Leon ben Moses Mosconi](#), a Romaniote Jew from [Achrida](#) edited and expanded the Sefer Josippon later.<sup>[11][12]</sup> This community of Byzantine Jews of southern Italy produced such prominent works like the Sefer Ahimaaz of [Ahimaaz ben Paltiel](#), the Sefer Hachmoni of [Shabbethai Donnolo](#), the Aggadath Bereshit and many [Piyyutim](#).<sup>[13][14][15][16][17]</sup> The liturgical writings of these Romaniote Jews, especially the piyyut were eminent for the development of the [Ashkenazi Mahzor](#), as they found their way through Italy to [Ashkenaz](#) and are preserved to this day in the most Ashkenazi mahzorim.<sup>[18]</sup>

The Jews of Southern Italy continued to be Greek-speakers until the 15th century (where they were living together with their Greek-speaking [Christian counterparts](#)). When they were expelled and went to different regions of Greece, especially [Corfu](#), [Epirus](#) and [Thessaloniki](#), they could continue speak their Greek language, even if this language was somewhat different from that of Greece.<sup>[19]</sup>

In the 12th century, [Benjamin of Tudela](#) travelled through the [Byzantine Empire](#) and recorded details about communities of Jews in [Corfu](#), [Arta](#), [Aphilon](#), [Patras](#), [Corinth](#), [Thebes](#), [Chalkis](#), [Thessaloniki](#), and [Drama](#). The largest community in Greece at that time was in Thebes, where he found about 2000 Jews. They were engaged mostly in cloth dyeing, [weaving](#), in producing of silverware and making silk garments. At the time, they were already known as "Romaniotes".



Colonel [Mordechai Frizis](#) (1893–1940) from the ancient Romaniote Greek Jewish community of [Chalkis](#)<sup>[20]</sup> with his wife Victoria.

The first Romaniote synagogue under [Ottoman](#) rule was *Etz ha-Hayyim* ([Hebrew](#): עץ החיים Lit. Tree of Life, frequently a name of Romaniote Synagogues) in [Prousa](#) in [Asia Minor](#) which passed to Ottoman authority in 1324.<sup>[21]</sup> After [Sultan Mehmed II's Conquest of Constantinople](#) he found the city in a state of disarray. After suffering many sieges, a devastating conquest by [Catholic Crusaders](#) in 1204 and even a case of the [Black Death](#) in 1347,<sup>[22]</sup> the city was a shade of its former glory. The event of the conquest of Constantinople, despite the city was in a state of disarray, was written down by a Romaniote Payetan in a lament hymn, composed with several phrases from the Old Testament in the *shibusi* style.<sup>[23]</sup> As Mehmed wanted the city as his new capital, he decreed the rebuilding of the city.<sup>[24]</sup> And in order to revivify Constantinople he ordered that [Muslims](#), [Christians](#) and [Jews](#) from all over his empire be resettled in the new capital.<sup>[24]</sup> Within months most of the Empire's Romaniote Jews, from the [Balkans](#) and [Anatolia](#), were concentrated in Constantinople, where they made up 10% of the city's population.<sup>[25]</sup> The forced resettlement, though not intended as an [anti-Jewish measure](#), was perceived as an "expulsion" by the Jews.<sup>[26]</sup> Nevertheless, the Romaniotes would remain the most influential Jewish community in the Empire for decades to come, determining the [Chief Rabbis](#) of the towns and the [Hakham Bashi](#) of the Ottoman Empire



until their leading position was lost to a wave of new Jewish arrivals. These events initiated the first great numerical decline of the Romaniote community.

The number of Jews was soon bolstered by small groups of [Ashkenazi Jews](#) that immigrated to the Ottoman Empire between 1421 and 1453.<sup>[25]</sup> Waves of Sephardi Jews were expelled from [Spain](#) in 1492; many settled in [Ottoman](#)-ruled Greece. They spoke a separate language, [Ladino](#). Thessaloniki had one of the largest (mostly Sephardi) Jewish communities in the world and a solid rabbinical tradition. On the island of [Crete](#), the Jews historically played an important part in the transport trade. In the centuries following 1492 most of the Romaniote communities were assimilated by the more numerous Sephardim.

The status of [Jewry](#) in the [Ottoman Empire](#) often hinged on the whims of the [Sultan](#). [Murad III](#) for example ordered that the attitude of all non-Muslims should be one of "humility and abjection" and should not "live near Mosques or in tall buildings" or own slaves.<sup>[27]</sup>

After the liberation of Ioannina on February 21, 1913 the Rabbi and the Romaniote community of Ioannina welcomed at the New Synagogue of Ioannina the liberator of the city the Crown Prince Constantine, the future [King of the Hellenes Constantine I](#).<sup>[28]</sup>

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Romaniote community of Ioannina numbered about 4,000 people, mostly lower-class tradesmen and craftsmen. Their numbers dwindled after that due to economic out-migration; after the Holocaust and on the eve of [World War II](#), there were approximately 1950 Romaniotes left in Ioannina. Centered around the old fortified part of the city (or [Kastro](#)), where the community had been living for centuries, they maintained two synagogues, one of which, the Kehila Kedosha Yashan Synagogue still remains today.

A strong Romaniote community was present in Corfu until the late 19th century, when a [pogrom](#) sparked by [blood libel](#) charges forced most of the Jewish community to leave the island.

## The Romaniote Nusach and Minhag

The Romaniote [Prayer Rite](#) as seen in the original *Mahzor Romania* and Romaniote [commentaries](#) on [Jewish Exegesis](#) and [Jewish Law](#), vary from those of the [Askenazi](#), the [Sephardic](#) and the [Mizrachi](#) Jews, and are closer to those of the [Italian Jews](#): some of these are thought to have been based on the [Jerusalem Talmud](#) instead of the [Babylonian Talmud](#) (see [Palestinian minhag](#)). This Minhag was once widespread in Southern Italy, the Balkans, Greece, Anatolia and the Crimea.<sup>[29]</sup> The Romaniotes spoke recently [Judaeo-Greek](#) and many of them still use the [Greek language](#). [Tobiah ben Eliezer](#) (טוביה בר אליעזר), a Greek-speaking Talmudist and poet of the 11th century, worked and lived in the

city of [Kastoria](#). He is the author of the *Lekach Tov* a midrashic commentary on the Pentateuch and the Five Megillot and also of some poems.

Romaniote scholars translated the [Tanakh](#) into Greek. A polyglot edition of the [Bible](#) published in [Constantinople](#) in 1547 has the Hebrew text in the middle of the page, with a Ladino ([Judaeo-Spanish](#)) translation on one side, a Yevanic translation on the other and the [Judaeo-Aramaic Targum](#) at the bottom of the page.<sup>[30]</sup>

In the early Romaniote Rite the [Torah](#) was subdivided in [Sedarim](#) while the whole Torah was read in the Palestinian way of the [Triennial cycle](#). The order for reading the [Haftarah](#) followed an own custom.<sup>[31]</sup> The Romaniote Torah scrolls are housed in "tikim" ('tik', from Greek 'thekai' "container"), where they never are taken completely out. Among the Romaniote Jews, tradition dictates, that the most holy Sefer Torah, the Law of Moses, be read with the scroll standing upright in its tik; it is considered improper to lay it flat.<sup>[32]</sup> The [siddur](#) (prayer book) for the Romaniote rite was known as the *Mahzor Romania*. It was actually the first [Mahzor](#) and represented the Minhag of the [Byzantine Jews](#) which is the oldest European Jewish Prayer rite. Later the first Mahzor was printed, the *Mahzor Bene Roma*.<sup>[33][34][35]</sup> The Romaniote Jews have their own form of wedding blessing. Upon the betrothal, seven blessings are bestowed on the bride and groom to be, while wedding [wreaths](#) are covering the heads of the groom and the bride and are interchanged on their heads. At the end of a full year, the [Ketubah](#) was read at the wedding ceremony proper. This is different in that other Jews bless the bride and groom at the time of the actual wedding. In addition, there are ritual differences in the building of the Synagogue and in the building and the use of the mikve. It is a Romaniote tradition to write on the Ketubah the year [since creation of the world](#) and the year since the [destruction of the Temple](#).<sup>[32][36]</sup> The Romaniotes traditionally gave to a child a mystical document known as an "Aleph". This hand-painted "birth and circumcision certificate" was created by a family member and then handed down. The aleph was written in mystical codes for the purpose of warding off the wiles of Lillith, Adam's first wife. The Romaniotes are well known for their hymns in Judeo-Greek and Hebrew, for their special way of [cantillation](#), based on the [Byzantine melos](#)<sup>[37]</sup> and for their Jewish-Greek folksongs, based on regional melodies.<sup>[38][39]</sup> Jewish immigrants from Sicily brought to Ioannina the celebration of the Sicilian [Purim Katan](#). The Jews of Ioannina call this holiday "Pourimopoulo". They read the special "Megillah for the Purim Katan of Syracuse" and sing corresponding songs and hymns for this festivity. The Mahzor of the Romaniote [Kaffa Rite](#) from the year 1735 gives the order to read the [Megillat Antiochos](#) in the Mincha of Shabbat Hanukkah.<sup>[40]</sup> In the second half of the 19th century, the Romaniote community of Greece made an effort to preserve the Romaniote liturgical heritage of Ioannina and Arta, by printing various liturgical texts in the Hebrew printing presses of Salonika.<sup>[41]</sup> Today, the Romaniote Liturgy follows (with slight differences) the mainstream Sephardic usage, while the Romaniotes and the Jews of Corfu have preserved their old and own Judaeo-Greek and Hebrew piyyutim, their own way of cantillation and



their special customs. A custom is, which is still followed in the [Etz Hayyim Synagogue](#) of Crete to read on [Yom Kippur](#) the [Book of Jonah](#) in Judaeo-Greek.<sup>[42]</sup> Another custom was to chant the [Song of Songs](#) verse by verse by alternating from Hebrew to its paraphrasing [Targum Jonathan](#)-translation after the morning service on the last two days of Pessach.<sup>[41]</sup> Romaniote Synagogues have their own layout: the [Bimah](#) (where the [Torah scrolls](#) are read out during services) is on a raised [dais](#) on the western wall, the [Aron haKodesh](#) (where the [Torah scrolls](#) are kept) is on the eastern wall and in the middle there is a wide interior [aisle](#). Votive offerings made of silver as stars or tablets called "Shadayot" were a thankful gift to the Synagogue of congregants who have received help, healing or salvation by God. The Romaniote Term for the Passover ceremony (Seder) is "חובה/Hova", which means obligation. The [Jewish Museum of Greece](#) published in 2004 a Romaniote rite Pesach-Seder CD (The Ioannina Haggadah (CD)). In the years 2017 and 2018 the Romaniote rite Haggadah and the Romaniote rite Prayer book (Siddur) have been published in a series, containing also Romaniote poetry, the Haftarat according to the Romaniote custom and other texts.<sup>[43][44]</sup> A Romaniote rite based reform Siddur in Greek and Hebrew has also been published in 2018.<sup>[45]</sup>



View on the [Torah Ark](#) of the Kehila Kadosha Yashan Synagogue of [Ioannina](#) with the typical Romaniote Shadayot ([Votive offerings](#) similar to the Byzantine Christian tradition) hanging on the [Parochet](#) and a Romaniote "Aleph" on the right side (a circumcision certificate with [Berachot](#) (mostly the [Shiviti](#)) and ancestral details).

## Language and literature

The intellectual pursuits of Romaniote Jews reflected in their history their geographical location within the Jewish and gentile world. Direct heir to Palestinian Jewish traditions on the one hand, they were also heir to the teachings of the [Greco-Roman world](#). The Byzantine Jewish/Romaniote literature shows a rich blend of [Hellenistic Jewish](#) and [Palestinian rabbinic](#) traditions. Romaniote Jewry, throughout its history, expended great effort on religious poetry, which reached its peak during the period 1350-1550. The writing of piyyutim was clearly held as the own genre. [Hillel ben](#)

**Eliakim** wrote down in the twelfth century his exegetical commentary *Sifre ve Sifra*. **Shemarya Halkriti** who moved after 1328 to Negroponte prepared his supercommentary to Ibn Ezra and, circa 1346-47 wrote his *Sefer Amasyahu*, a handbook of biblical apologetics. In tune with the intellectual currents among Romaniotes, Shemarya was trained in Philosophy and was able to translate directly from Greek to Hebrew. The *Sefer Yosippon* was written by the Byzantine Jews of Southern Italy. R. Elnatan ben Moses Kalkes (from **Kilkis**) wrote a lengthy kabbalistic treatise entitled *Eben Saphir*. **Mordecai Komatiano** has left a legacy of some fifteen works on astronomy, grammar (dikduk), biblical commentaries and piyyutim; some of the later have even been included in the Karaite prayerbook. Several manuscripts containing mystical works have survived. The question of an independent Romaniote **mystical** tradition, probably deriving directly from Palestinian antecedents, is proved.<sup>[46]</sup> An abridgement of **Aristotle's** *Logic* by Yoseph HaYevani was made available to those Jews (Sephardi immigrants) who were less proficient in Greek. The Byzantine Karaites, showed a knowledge of Greek philosophical terminology. Rabbinic authors spiced their comments with Greek phrases. The familiarity of Romaniote Jewry with the **Greek language** is well documented. Biblical translations, Piyyutim, Folksongs, Ketubbot, Liturgical instructions, Glossaries, Mystical texts and the use of Greek words in Commentaries in Judaeo-Greek are known.<sup>[47]</sup>

## Judaeo-Greek

The **Judaeo-Greek** of Ioannina underwent after WWII a process of *koineization*. The only phonetic differences to **Standard Modern Greek**, which could be noted shortly after the war have been [x] > [s] before front vowels, unusual intonation patterns and some peculiar lexical items, mostly of Hebrew-Aramaic provenance.<sup>[48]</sup> Lexemes, such as Hebrew-Aramaic loans, were easily identified as "ours" and "theirs," Sephardic vs. Romaniote.<sup>[49]</sup> While composing texts on their religion, the Greek Jews followed the literary standard of syntax and morphology, using a number of Hebrew-Aramaic loanwords.<sup>[50]</sup> The Hebrew-Aramaic component would be written down in ways reflecting traditional Romaniote pronunciation, for example *Shalom*, was spelled and written as Σαλώμ (*Salom*). Krivoruchko states in her work *Judeo-Greek in the era of globalization* that Judaeo-Greek has always been interchangeable with the spoken variety of Greek, which was used by the surrounding Christian community, but had a few special features in its various geographical and chronological types (for example the Judaeo-Greek of Crete († 1945) and that of Constantinople).<sup>[51]</sup> Beside of the few phonetic differences between Judaeo-Greek and Standard Modern Greek the most common difference has been in Judaeo-Greek the use of Hebrew and Aramaic loanwords.<sup>[50]</sup> Considerable are also the phonetic differences between Romaniote Hebrew (look downwards on paragraph **#Romaniote Hebrew**) and Sephardic Hebrew, for example Shavuot was spelled as Σαβώθ (*savóth*) whereas sephardic speaks *Shavuot*.<sup>[52]</sup>

Second and third generation Romaniote immigrants in New York city have good knowledge of Greek. In the beginning of the 21st century 90% asserted that they understand Greek while 40% could speak Greek comfortably. Over a third could read Greek satisfactorily. The numbers of skilled persons in the Greek Language are much lower in the group of the Greek Sephardim outside of Greece.<sup>[53]</sup>

## Romaniote Hebrew

The Romaniote pronunciation of the Hebrew language is in its major features very close to the common Modern Hebrew pronunciation. The vowel-system is a simple five-vowel system without either quantitative or qualitative distinctions. Typical was the absence of distinction between: the Semitic velarized and non-velarized stops [t] and [t̪], spelled [ט/ת], and [k/q], spelled [ק/כ]. The distinction between [s] and [ʃ] (צ/ס) is maintained as [s/ts], i. e. a voiceless alveolar fricative against a voiceless alveolar affricate, a pronunciation common to Byzantine and Ashkenazic pronunciation; "strong" and "weak" [t], spelled [ת/ת] (t/θ) preserved in Ashkenazic pronunciation as [t]/[s]; velar and pharyngeal [ħ] and [χ], spelled [כ/ח], both of which are pronounced [χ], as in Ashkenazic; the glottal and pharyngeal stops [ʔ] and [ʕ], spelled [א/ע], both of which are weakened to the point of almost total absence in syllable-initial and syllable-final position, another characteristic shared with the Ashkenazic tradition. *Shin* was pronounced as [s] in the Romaniote tradition of Hebrew pronunciation. The loss of spirantization rule for postvocalic, non-geminated Old Hebrew b, d, g, p, t, k homorganic fricatives (this rule is not found now in either the Balkan or the North African Sephardic diaspora) may have been due Romaniote practice (it is observed partly in Yiddish Hebraisms and in the Ashkenazic pronunciation of monolingual Hebrew texts). The [ט] was pronounced as [d͡z] and the [ת] as [ð] which are a typical sounds of the [Standard Modern Greek](#).<sup>[54][55][56]</sup> The Hebrew Paleography resp. the Hebrew Epigraphy recognises a specific "Byzantine" or "Romaniote" Handwriting system of the [Hebrew alphabet](#), which has been developed among the [Soferim](#) of the Greek-speaking lands. In many cases manuscripts of Romaniote origin from the Byzantine Empire, or from later times can be recognised as "Romaniote", only with the science of Paleography, if they do not contain a [Colophon \(publishing\)](#) or other characteristics of identification.<sup>[57][58][59][60]</sup>

## Holocaust and afterwards



A woman weeps during the deportation of the Jews of Ioannina on March 25, 1944. The majority of the Jews deported were murdered on or shortly after April 11, 1944, when their train reached [Auschwitz-Birkenau](#).<sup>[61][62]</sup>

During [World War II](#), when Greece was occupied by [Nazi Germany](#), 86% of the Greek Jews, especially those in the areas occupied by [Nazi Germany](#) and [Bulgaria](#), were murdered. Some Greeks collaborated with the deportations or expropriated Jewish property; a few, encouraged by the [Greek Orthodox Church](#), sheltered Jews.<sup>[63]</sup> Roughly 49,000 Jews—Romaniotes and Sephardim—were deported from [Thessaloniki](#) alone and murdered. Many Greek Jews were forced to pay their own tickets to the death camps.<sup>[64]</sup> Almost all Romaniote Jews of the island of Crete, together with some resistance fighters, died on the ship *Tanaís* when it was torpedoed by HMS *Vivid* on 9 June 1944.<sup>[65][66]</sup>

During the German occupation, the Romaniotes' ability to speak [Greek](#) enabled them to hide better from German deportations than Sephardi Jews who spoke [Ladino](#).

The majority of Romaniotes who survived the Holocaust left for Israel or the United States at the end of the war.<sup>[67]</sup> The creation of the state of [Israel](#) in 1948, combined with the violence and anarchy of the [Greek Civil War](#) (1946-1949), led to an immigration of a number of Romaniotes to Israel. The great earthquake on the island of [Zakynthos](#) in 1953 led the last remaining Romaniote Jews to leave the island towards Athens. The vast majority of Romaniotes have relocated to Israel and the United States, with the world's largest community located in New York.<sup>[68][69]</sup>

## Present day

Today approximately 4,500 to 6,000 Jews remain in Greece. Of these, only a small number are Romaniotes, who live mainly in [Thessaloniki](#), [Ioannina](#), [Chalkis](#) and [Athens](#). About 3,500 Jews now live in [Athens](#), while another 1,000 live in [Thessaloniki](#).<sup>[70]</sup> A mixed community of Romaniote and Apulian Jews still lives on the Island of [Corfu](#).<sup>[71]</sup>

## Greece

### Athens

The Ioanniotiki Synagogue, situated above the Jewish Community of Athens offices at #8 Melidoni St., is the only Romaniote synagogue in [Athens](#). Built in 1906, it now has services only during the [High Holy Days](#), but can be opened for visitors upon request through the Jewish Community office.

The [Jewish identity](#) of another building found in the excavations of the ancient Agora in Athens, is questionable. It is believed that the [Metroon](#), discovered in 1930 at the foot of the hill [Hephaestion](#) (Thesion) was used as a synagogue during its construction at the end of the 4th century CE (396–400). This view was expressed by the archaeologist H. Thompson, from the American School of Classical Studies in Athens, but was not developed into a complete theory. The [Jewish identity](#) of the Metroon was based on a small piece of marble found near the Metroon that had two Jewish symbols carved on one side, and the resemblance of the building to the synagogue of Sardis in Asia Minor.

### Chalkis

The Romaniote Jewish Community of Chalkis is not the oldest one in Greece, but it is the only one in Europe that has been living in the same city for 2,500 years without interruption and the community is still active in the city's life. The community has a synagogue and a cemetery with important and old inscriptions. The Synagogue is on Kotsou Street. It is unknown when the first synagogue in Chalkis was constructed. In 1854, during the Holy Week a great fire destroyed the synagogue. In 1855 it was re-constructed in the same size with funds offered by [Sophie de Marbois-Lebrun, Duchess of Plaisance](#).<sup>[72]</sup> The Synagogue opens every Friday evening and occasionally on Shabbat morning.<sup>[73]</sup>

### Ioannina



Municipal Ethnographic Museum of Ioannina with Romaniote items

In [Ioannina](#), the Romaniote community has dwindled to 50 mostly elderly people. The Kehila Kedosha Yashan Synagogue there is open primarily on the High Holidays, or in the case of the visit of a chazzan, or is opened for visitors on request. Immigrant Romaniotes return every summer to the old synagogue. After long time a [Bar Mitzvah](#) (the Jewish ritual for celebrating the [coming of age](#) of a child) was held in the synagogue in 2000, and was an exceptional event for the community.<sup>[74]</sup>

The [synagogue](#) is located in the old fortified part of the city known as *Kastro*, at 16 Ioustinianou street. Its name means "the Old Synagogue". It was constructed in 1829, most probably over the ruins of an older synagogue. Its architecture is typical of the [Ottoman](#) era, a large building made of stone. The interior of the synagogue is laid out in the Romaniote way: the [Bimah](#) (where the [Torah scrolls](#) are read out during services) is on a raised [dais](#) on the western wall, the [Aron haKodesh](#) (where the [Torah scrolls](#) are kept) is on the eastern wall and in the middle there is a wide interior [aisle](#). The names of the Ioanniote Jews who were killed in the [Holocaust](#) are engraved in stone on the walls of the synagogue. The Bet Chaim cemetery in Ioannina belongs to the community.

## Volos

In the community of Volos<sup>[75]</sup> the Romaniote pre-Sephardic traditions prevail.<sup>[76][77]</sup> Ancient historic texts mention that Jews lived in the region of [Magnesia](#), [Thessaly](#) and in particular in neighbouring [Almyros](#) as early as the 1st century AD. Historians argue that Jews have been living in ancient [Demetrias](#) since the 2nd century AD. Ancient Jewish tombstones dating back to 325–641 AD, were also discovered in the neighbouring city of [Phthiotic Thebes](#).<sup>[78]</sup> [Moshe Pesach](#) was Rabbi of Volos who saved Greek Jews during the Holocaust and helped to consolidate the community of Volos after World War II.

## Israel



Most Romaniotes in Israel live in [Tel Aviv](#).<sup>[79]</sup> There are two Romaniote synagogues in Israel: the Zakynthos Synagogue in Tel Aviv, and the Beit Avraham Ve'ohel Sarah liKehilat Ioanina in [Nachlaot, Jerusalem](#). The former Romaniote [Yanina Synagogue](#) in the [Christian Quarter](#), Jerusalem is no longer in use.<sup>[80]</sup>

## United States

Only one Romaniote [synagogue](#) (from originally several Romaniote Synagogues in New York) is in operation in the entire Western Hemisphere: [Kehila Kedosha Janina](#), at 280 Broome Street, in the [Lower East Side](#) of [Manhattan](#), where it is used by the Romaniote emigrant community.<sup>[81]</sup> It maintains a mailing list of 3,000 Romaniote families, most of them living in the [tri-state area](#).<sup>[81][82]</sup> It is open for services every Saturday morning as well as all major Jewish holidays. The synagogue also houses a museum devoted to Greek Jewry and offers guided tours to visitors on Sundays.<sup>[81]</sup>

## Genetics

DNA research and genealogical works based on the Romaniote communities of Ioannina and Zakynthos are in progress.<sup>[83][84][85][86]</sup>

## Notable Romaniotes



Statue of [Mordechai Frizis](#) in [Chalkida](#)

[Byzantine times](#) to the [Ottoman Empire](#):

- [Asaph ben Berechiah](#)
- [Moses Capsali](#)
- [Mordecai Comtino](#)
- [Moses of Crete](#), a [Jewish messiah claimant](#) of the 5th century C.E.

- [Shabbethai Donnolo](#)
- [Tobiah ben Eliezer](#)
- [Hillel ben Eliakim](#)
- [Elia del Medigo](#)
- [Joseph Solomon Delmedigo](#)
- [Ahimaaz ben Paltiel](#)
- [Eleazar ben Killir](#)
- [Elijah Mizrachi](#), [Hakham Bashi](#) of the [Ottoman Empire](#)
- [Judah Leon ben Moses Mosconi](#)
- [Leo II Mung Archbishop of Ohrid](#)
- [Shemariah of Negropont](#)
- [Zerachiah HaYavani](#)
- [Sabbatai Zevi](#), a Jewish messiah claimant of the 17th century C.E.
- Greek-speaking [Karaites of Constantinople](#):
- [Caleb Afendopolo](#)
- [Elijah Bashyazi](#)
- [Aaron ben Joseph of Constantinople](#)
- [Aaron ben Elijah](#)
- [Judah Hadassi](#)

Modern Times:

- [Abraham Cohen of Zante](#), a [Jewish physician](#), [rabbi](#), religious philosopher and [poet](#) on [Zakynthos](#)
- [Mordechai Frizis](#), officer of the Greek Army during the [Greco-Italian War](#)
- [Moshe Pesach](#), Rabbi and Recipient of the [Order of the Phoenix \(Greece\)](#), which was given to him by [George II of Greece King of the Hellenes](#)
- [Rae Dalven](#), a prominent Romaniotissa, particularly noted for her translation of modern Greek poetry
- [Amalia Bakas](#), a singer of Greek traditional and [rembetiko](#) songs with a successful career in the United States.

- **Mathias Naphtali**, Former Assistant District Attorney of Brooklyn, and Liberal Party candidate for New York State Senate in 1950
- **Albert Cohen**, francophone Swiss writer
- **Jack H. Jacobs**, Vietnam War veteran. Medal of Honor recipient
- **Albert Levis**, a psychiatrist, philosopher and innkeeper of the **Wilburton Inn** in **Manchester, Vermont**
- **Minos Matsas**, of the Matsas family from **Ioannina**, music producer (see **Minos EMI**)
- **Savas Matsas**, is a Greek intellectual, author and leader of the **Workers Revolutionary Party (Greece)**
- **Joshua Matza**, is a former **Israeli** Minister of Health and former president and CEO of **State of Israel Bonds**
- **Katherine, Crown Princess of Yugoslavia**, a descendant of the Romaniote branches *Batis* and *Dostis*
- Leon Batis, a holocaust survivor and hero
- **Alexander Levis**, University Professor of Electrical, Computer, and Systems Engineering at George Mason University and former Chief Scientist of the U.S. Air Force
- **Alberto Nahmias**, legendary Greek football player who played for **Iraklis Thessaloniki** club and was the first ever official goalscorer for the **Greek national football team**
- **Avram Pengas**, a musician of traditional and popular Greek music in the United States
- Albert Sabbas, a renowned nuclear physicist
- **Georges Moustaki**, Egyptian-Greek-French singer-songwriter
- **Moisis Elisaf**, mayor of **Ioannina** (2019-)

## See also

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- **Hellenistic Jews**
- **Jewish Koine Greek**
- **History of the Jews in Greece**
- **History of the Jews in the Ottoman Empire**
- **History of the Jews in Turkey**
- **Thessaloniki** and **Ioannina**, the two cities in Greece with the most prominent Jewish communities

- [Greek citron](#)

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## External links

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- [The Association of Friends of Greek Jewry](#)
  - [United Brotherhood Good Hope Society of Janina Inc.](#)
  - [Seder Tefillot ke-minhag kehillot Romania, Venice 1545](#) , Romaniote prayer book for the Weekdays and Holidays
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