

# Genealogy tourism and city tourism in Coimbra. Proposal for a Jewish culture route

Norberto Santos, Claudete Oliveira Moreira and Luís Silveira

Norberto Santos, Claudete Oliveira Moreira and Luís Silveira all are based at the Department of Geography and Tourism, CEGOT, University of Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal.

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – *Tourism in Coimbra today is influenced by the fact that the Univer(s)city was distinguished as a World Heritage Site in 2013. The number of visits has grown very significantly in recent years, but the diversification of the tourist offer is still weak and unable to take advantage of existing resources. This paper aims to present genealogy tourism as an alternative urban cultural tourism in Coimbra.*

**Design/methodology/approach** – *Methodology involved mapping the Jewish culture elements in the city of Coimbra, and a route was outlined and proposed.*

**Findings** – *Genealogy tourism resources are identified in the historic centre of the city. These alternative spaces need urban rehabilitation and (re)functionalisation, which allowed the authors to rethink tourism in Coimbra. They are the motivation to visit for all urban cultural tourists, especially Israelis/Jews, and provide contact with places where the experiences of ancestors combine with the history and memory of places, with recent discoveries and the elements of Jewish culture in the city.*

**Originality/value** – *It is concluded that the quantity, diversity, authenticity and singularity of the heritage resources that bear witness to the Jewish presence in Coimbra are sufficient assets to create a route, to enrich the tourist experience in the city and to include the destination in the Sephardic routes.*

**Keywords** *City tourism, Genealogy tourism, Jewish Heritage Tourism (JHT), Jewish culture, Coimbra*

**Paper type** *Case study*

## 1. Introduction

Nowadays, we have a new tourist, one who is a mix of mass-produced goods and identity products, although increasingly active, aware and informed about the choice of their destinations, modes of travel and the choice of leisure time, activities (Santos & Silveira, 2019; Urry, 1995) and tourist attractions. This matches the understanding of Poon (1993) in relation to the new and old tourist, regarded as embodied, although not necessarily so, in the same person. It also matches the main themes of Krippendorf (1999) related to leisure and travel, Novelli (2005), Alzua, O'Leary, and Morrison (1998), Dinis and Krakover (2016), related to niche tourism, Richards and Wilson (2008) concerning creative tourism, Netto and Gaetta (2010) related to experience tourism and Pine and Gilmore (2014) regarding transformative experience.

Marketing that is becoming more experiential and strategic recreates each offer, creates space and develops a new type of market, one which is niche/alternative or special interest tourism and which can be found in the city (Aall & Koens, 2019). This is designed to meet a demand that is increasingly informed, diversified, differentiated, ethical, adventurous and wanting contact with the local community (Martins, 2010); it is clearly rooted in cultural tourism, personal development and behaviours through tourism. Behaviours, according to Gruffudd, Herbert, and Piccini (1999), stem from thoughts and ideas prompted by indirect contact with the stimulation of heritage materials, based on people's forebears. This means

it is important to see heritage tourism not as an arbitrary element but as meeting socio-psychological needs (Poria, Butler, & Airey, 2003; Menor-Campos, Pérez-Gálvez, Hidalgo-Fernández, & López-Guzmán, 2020).

This framework accommodates genealogy tourism, which is the context for our exploration of this motivation for tourism. It concerns the search for a common culture; the past and the family histories; the roots of a people; knowledge of the traditions; and knowledge of ethnicities, regions and places which have a special relationship with these tourists. It is in this context that the tourism that values the Jewish heritage belongs.

Jewish Heritage Tourism (JHT) is a recent segment of cultural tourism that has been growing in a number of European countries, including Germany, Poland, Czechia, Austria, Hungary, Lithuania, Italy, Spain and Portugal (Corsale, 2021; Gaižutytė-Filipavičienė, 2020; Gruber, 2002; Krakover, 2013).

Jewish heritage is an integral part of European history and culture, being relevant in many cities which bear witness to a history of persecution and (in)tolerance. Historic city centres, synagogues and Jewish Quarters, especially, have been rehabilitated throughout Europe, often as tourist attractions; Jewish museums have sprung up and urban areas have been remodelled. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, Klezmer music concerts, festivals and exhibitions have become more common and attract many non-Jews (Gruber, 2002). There are cultural elements of considerable relevance in Coimbra, which could boost the appreciation of relationships with other places with a Jewish culture included in Portugal's Jewish Quarters Network – the Sepharad Routes.

As happens all over Europe, historic city centres offer a density and richness of heritage that can make them World Heritage Sites (García-Hernández, Calle-Vaquero, & Yubero, 2017) and must be managed actively (Coca-Stefaniak, Parker, Quin, Rinaldi, & Byrom, 2009). Since this is not a simple process, part of the heritage of these centres remains in the shadows. Identifying and structuring other heritage in an environment of great tourist appeal can help to balance the carrying capacity (Zekan, Weismayer, Gunter, & Schuh, 2022) of urban attractions and highlight the diversity of supply.

In 2005, the Council of Europe certified the European Route of Jewish Heritage, a cultural route that seeks to preserve and promote Jewish culture through tourism, which is something we want to develop in Coimbra's historic centre. The objective is to lay the foundation for the creation of a Jewish culture route in Coimbra, while at the same time highlighting local Jewish initiatives (mainly conferences, exhibitions and pedagogical programmes) promoted by the city council and the University. At the same time, this article suggests a proposal for heritage enhancement by creating a route that could be an alternative in redistributing concentrated tourist flows. The pedestrian route will cover a wide historical period within the city centre and aims to diversify the tourist offer by identifying less explored tourist areas, like those associated with the areas where the Sephardic Jews of Coimbra (Jews who settled in the Iberian Peninsula [Sepharad]) lived since the Middle Ages.

## 2. Genealogy tourism

Genealogy research has recently become a holistic form of leisure, assisted by the internet and relatively cheap air travel and accommodation. This cultural historical tourism, "roots tourism" (Basu, 2004), has become an important niche market. This is also how Santos and Yan (2010) and Birtwistle (2005) see it. They further state that if an online search does not provide the appropriate information, then travel is the next step. Josiam and Frazier (2008) argue that the relationship between genealogy, the internet and travel is crucial.

Studying the relationships between the generations of a family gives people a huge amount of information about their ancestry and enables them to create their family tree. As Basu (2004)

says, when we are asked who we are, we often guide the response by saying where we are from, mentioning our spatial, cultural and family heritage. This is why identity is such a presence in both academic research and popular discourse, with the goal of promoting the search for the “I”. According to [Jenkins \(2008, p. 5\)](#), identity is “the human capacity – rooted in language – to know ‘who’s who’” (and hence ‘what’s what’). This involves knowing who we are, knowing who others are, them knowing who we are, us knowing who they think we are and so on. And it matters. It is understandable, then, that [Santos and Yan \(2010, p. 56\)](#) should say that “genealogy tourism is turning into one of the fastest growing sub-segments in the heritage market”.

More and more people are interested in their family’s past and where their ancestors lived. At first they see it as a way to understand the meaning of the family, to feel cultural empathy, and ultimately they see it as a way to better comprehend their way of being, to find the characteristics that enable them to explain their actions, attitudes and preferences. However, this search for ancestry and roots and memories can be difficult to tackle since this type of tourism would be included in what [Stebbins \(2007\)](#) calls serious leisure and/or project-based leisure. This is because a major investment in time is needed to acquire specialised information through a guided search for elements that establish the path to follow and the destination to choose. The level of involvement of the tourist with the heritage visited is deep, with JHT being a purposeful or serendipitous form of cultural tourism, which has culture as the primary motivation for a visit whose outcome is a deep cultural experience or pleasant surprise of the uniqueness of the heritage, as stated by [Du Cros and McKercher \(2015\)](#). It is a kind of tourism that is both participatory and experiential and, for some, transformative ([Pine & Gilmore, 2014](#)), where the journey creates a narrative of idiosyncratic expression and great introspection. However, the theme still needs significant and serious study. As [Yakel \(2004\)](#) points out, the experiences of the crossing point between tourism and family histories based, for example, on trips to libraries containing genealogical sources have not yet been studied, and they offer a huge opportunity to supplement genealogy tourism.

Actually, JHT is a unique product, supported by several physical components that include the Historic Urban Landscape of Jewish neighbourhoods, the museums, the synagogues and the remembrance of people from the Jewish past ([Krakover, 2013](#)). The trip is motivated by the interest in multiple aspects of genealogy: monuments and heritage imbued with everyday life, and living spaces; historical documents and life journeys; the events and incidents, work and play, traditions and novelties, stories and facts; and cuisine. We therefore have the development of a new tourism product, which appears in the heart of a society in a crisis of memory, cultivating a feeling of nostalgia and discovery through the past ([Marschall, 2012](#)), mainly in cities. This nostalgia stimulates a desire/need to search for things that represent the past, whether tangible or intangible, and to experience the activities that relate to this specific history ([Tagarrinha, 2013](#)).

Thus, the desire to know the history of the family, of a culture in a specific location, of an ethnicity to which they feel connected, urges tourists to visit places that give them knowledge, that include them in a memory of something that feels like theirs. Motivated by the memory, tourists choose and decide the best destination(s) to visit. As [Prinke \(2010\)](#) notes, the search for ancestors, a culture with which we identify and that makes us unique always involves establishing the identity of each person or family, knowing that identity always incorporates not only similarity but also difference. The question related to identity issues is answered through tourist motivations, because these explain why tourists choose the place with which they feel a strong family connection or deep family roots after carrying out extensive research into their genealogy ([Prinke, 2010](#)). For visitors who find it difficult to relive their history, the JHT evokes the transformative experiences that recreate belonging, through the experiential connection to place(s) ([Leite, 2005](#)).

Memory and identity are very strong tourism motivations, and for [McCain and Ray \(2003\)](#), the meaning that tourists want to obtain on these journeys is only possible if those two elements are combined. Contrary to tourists, taken in a broad sense as people who travel based on an image or memory, they have of somewhere or a recollection of a feeling that connects them to a place, in this case, tourists are trying to acquire serious knowledge (in the sense expressed by [Stebbins, 2007](#)), and it is this desire to create something as yet hardly materialised that leads them to travel and seek out experiences that will become memories in the future.

As identity is what distinguishes us in the world, a knowledge of our past and our forebears will help us to know ourselves better and to create new attitudes and new ways of being in life, as we discover ourselves.

Many studies have focused on tourists' motivations to travel since [Lundberg \(1971\)](#), and more recently [Yousaf, Amin, and Santos \(2018\)](#). In this context, [Josiam and Frazier \(2008\)](#) define five main motivations in genealogy tourism:

1. family belonging;
2. visit to family and friends;
3. self-identity;
4. reaffirmation of identity; and
5. heritage place linked to family history.

From the tourism management standpoint, the importance of identifying and meeting the needs of niche clients is recognised ([Bunghez, 2021](#)), but the opportunities associated with the genealogy tourism segment of the market have been neglected ([Evans, 1998](#), cited by [Santos & Yan, 2010](#)). In particular, some propose that the baby boomer generation has had and will continue to have a significant impact on genealogy research and travel. They are believed to have the motivation, time and resources available to travel and identify their ancestors on a genealogical identity basis ([Prince, 2021](#)).

### 3. Methodology

The case study method is used ([Veal, 2018](#)). This focused on a single case, which is the *unit of analysis*. Observation, fieldwork for collection and geo-referencing of heritage elements using GPS coordinates and time-series analysis of tourists in the University were the techniques used within the case study.

This research also used secondary data from books, book chapters and articles to discover key attributes of Jewish culture in Coimbra. Also, various non-organised sources of information (maps, websites of the DMOs VisitPortugal, Centro de Portugal and Coimbra City Council, guide books, exhibitions, news published in the local and regional press) were checked to identify existing elements of Jewish culture in the city and to structure the route.

Jewish heritage is studied in its social and historical context. Here, the case study outlines the presence of relevant heritage and suggests the need for policy action. Thus, following [Veal \(2018, p. 401\)](#), the type of research conducted is "evaluative research" for the purpose of "establishing need for policy measures". These elements were located and geo-referenced, that is, the geographic coordinates of each element of Jewish culture that is included in the route were collected. Geographic information systems such as ArcMap software were used for this purpose. This made it possible to create a geo-referenced database of the elements of Jewish culture in the city, to be incorporated into the route, and also to edit, analyse and visualise the geospatial data and to design the route, optimising the distance, time and physical effort.

The criteria used to devise the proposed route included that it should begin in a tourist attraction, the University of Coimbra, that receives a large number of visitors, and that it should unite important elements of Jewish culture and ensure its consistency, valuing its spaces of daily life. The route therefore starts in the University, in the Alta (upper part of the city), and ends in the Jewish quarters, thereby meeting another criterion, that of accessibility and ease of movement, since the route goes down the hill crossing the Historic Centre. In addition, the number of visitors was collected at the University of Coimbra, to record the level of Israeli tourist demand and its year-on-year change (from 2015 to 2021), to assess the potential tourist demand for this route.

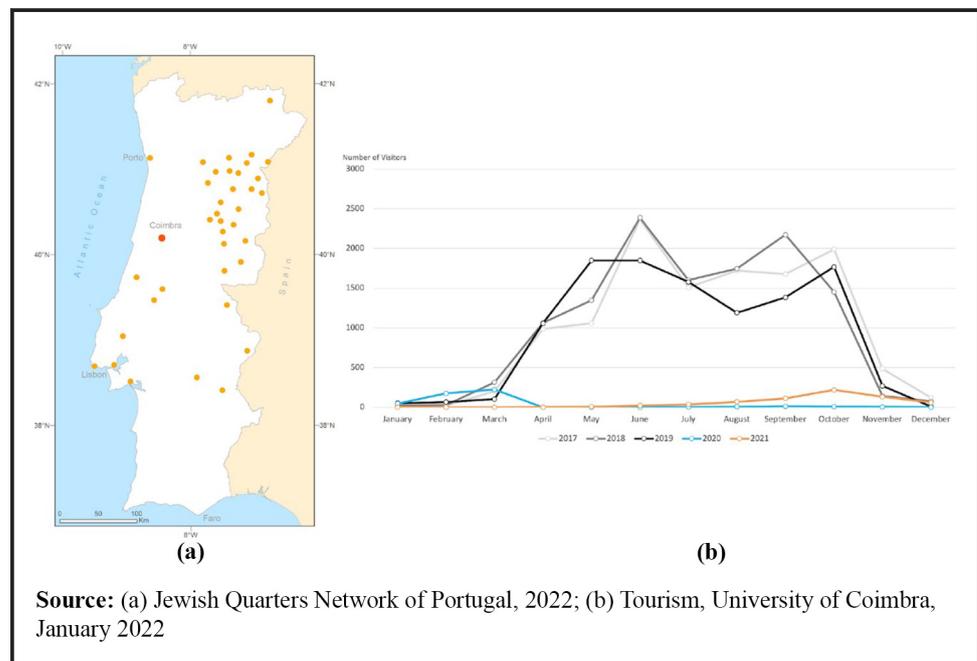
#### 4. Jewish community of Coimbra and Jewish Heritage Tourism

Jewish history and heritage in Portugal began to be used in 2011 with the creation of the Portuguese Network of Jewish Quarters – Sepharad Routes [Figure 1(a)]. In the Middle Ages, there were several Jewish Quarters in Portugal. Many Spanish Jews came to Portugal in 1492 when their cult was banned in the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon (Decree of Alhambra).

Coimbra had a documented community of Jews (Sephardi) (Alarcão, 2007, 2009; Catarino, Filipe, & Santos, 2009; Fiolhais, 2009; Gomes, 2003, 2009, 2016). The oldest document mentioning the presence of Jews in Portugal dates back to 950 and is a contract of donation of rural buildings, acquired from Jews. The Jewish community, which was already organised to a slight extent in the ninth and tenth centuries in Coimbra (Gomes, 2003), grew and prospered.

In the twelfth century, Coimbra had an important Jewish community. In the thirteenth century, the community was owner and tenant of urban houses; they grew vines, olives and

**Figure 1** (a) Jewish Quarters Network of Portugal, in 2022, with the inclusion of Coimbra, a city that had a significant Jewish community but which is not part of the network; (b) intra-annual change in the number of Israeli visitors to the University of Coimbra, from 2017 to 2021



cereals (Gomes, 2003) but were also involved in manual trades (cobblers, tailors, dyers and so forth) and in financial operations (Alarcão, 2009).

In 1496, King Manuel I signed an edict expelling the Jews from Portugal, so they were no longer an accepted religious minority. From then on, the alternative was forced conversion to Catholicism (known as New Christians). The Jewish heritage and other elements are referred to and can be found in several parts of the city (Figure 2). All are located in the Protected Asset Area of the *Universidade de Coimbra, Alta e Sofia*, inscribed in the Representative List of UNESCO World Heritage in 2013. Among the Jewish elements are the Jewish quarters, built and occupied by Hebrews and eventually becoming a city within the city. In the case of Coimbra, as elsewhere, they were generally located in the suburbs (nowadays, parts of the city centre).

Since the *Universidade de Coimbra, Alta e Sofia*, achieved UNESCO World Heritage status, the number of visitors has been steadily increasing and was already above half a million in 2017 (501,583 visitors). Israel has been a significant aspect of tourism in Coimbra. In 2017, Israeli tourists ranked tenth among visitors to the University of Coimbra, accounting for about 2.4% of the total. Between 2017 and 2021, the number of Israeli visitors varied considerably. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the number was very significant (in 2017: 12,145; in 2018: 12,348; in 2019: 11,175 visitors), particularly between April and October [Figure 1(b)]. The pandemic led to a very sharp fall (in 2020: 483 visitors), with a slight increase in 2021 (657 visitors) as tourism began a modest recovery.

There is quite a substantial tourist demand that should be encouraged and whose tourist experience is enriching. Putting together a route that incorporates the main Jewish elements in the city's historical centre, as proposed here, would benefit and diversify the offer for everyone who has cultural motivations. In the development/growth stage of Coimbra as a tourist destination (Butler, 2006), the offer has diversified to find additional products other than the attraction capacity of the main tourism product, that is, the Pátio dos Colégios – Royal Palace of the University and all the surrounding facilities and attractions.

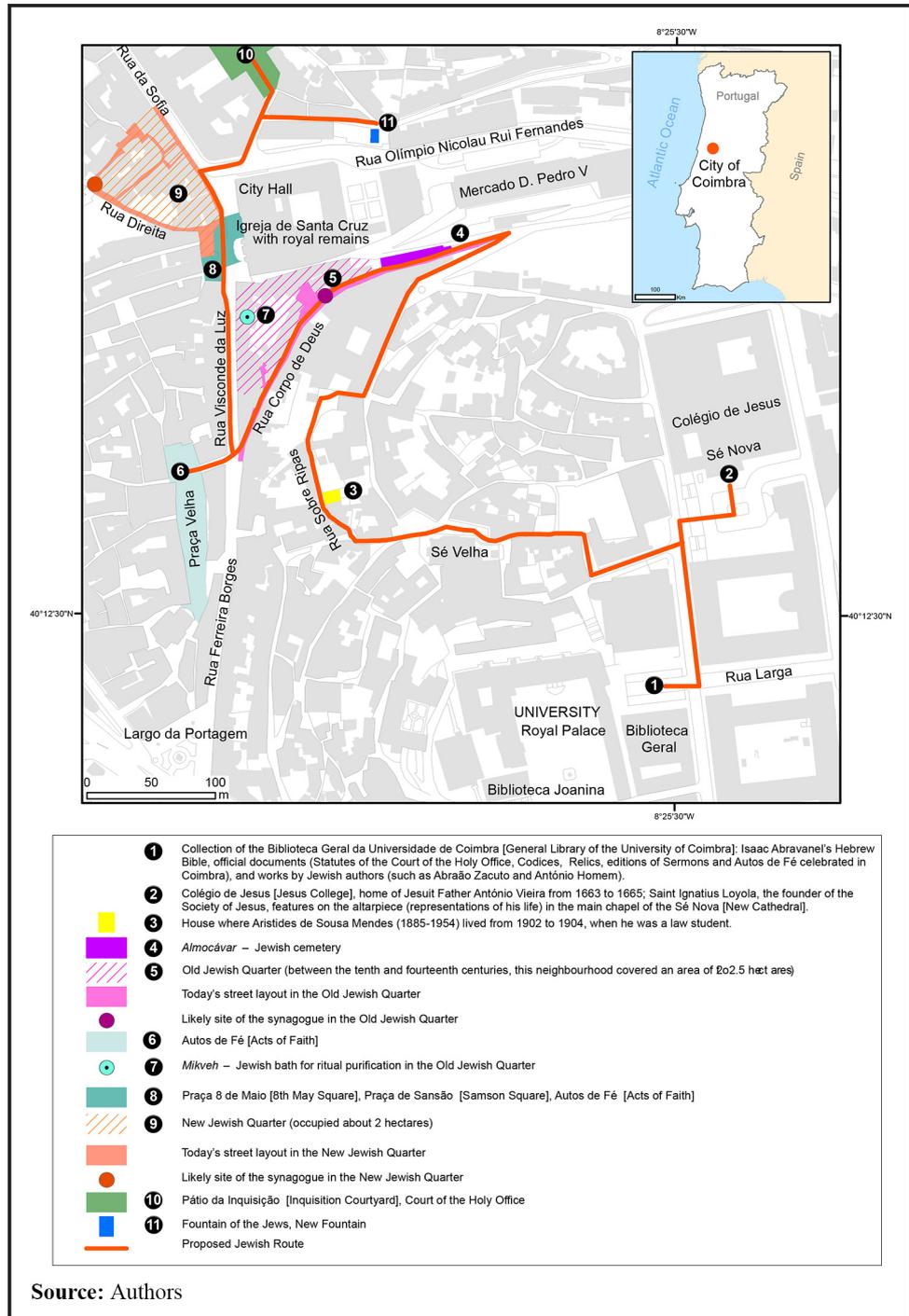
## 5. Results and discussion

The proposed route includes 11 points or stops, starting at the University of Coimbra and ending at the political centre of the city (Figure 2). The elements of Jewish culture presented are from different eras. With the definitive transfer of the University from Lisbon to Coimbra in 1537, an important new Jewish and Christian community formed part of its faculty (Tavares, 1993), which made important contributions to the advancement of knowledge particularly in the areas of medicine, botany and the exact sciences. The mathematician Pedro Nunes (1502–1578) and the botanist Garcia da Orta (1501–1568) were of Jewish ancestry (Folhais, 2009).

The Biblioteca Geral da Universidade de Coimbra (General Library of the University of Coimbra), Point 1, keeps important documents associated with this community, notably the Hebrew Bible of Isaac Abravanel (the most precious item), a Sephardic Jew and illustrious writer who was born in Lisbon in 1437 and died in Venice in 1508. According to Rodrigues (1998), he was the greatest representative of Jewish biblical exegesis of the second half of the fifteenth century, “the most important Jewish exegete and philosopher of religion at the end of the Middle Ages” (Rodrigues, 2010, p. 77). In addition to the Hebrew Bible, the collection of the general library has codices, relics and other treasures, as well as works by Jewish authors like Abraão Zacuto, António Homem, João Rodrigues Castelo Branco (*Amatus Lusitano*); and official documents like the statutes of the Court of the Inquisition; and editions of Sermons and *Autos de Fé* (“Acts of Faith”) celebrated in Coimbra.

Colégio de Jesus (Jesus College) and the Sé Nova (New Cathedral) represent Point 2. It was a private church of the Society of Jesus, until the Society's expulsion from Portugal in 1759. Colégio de Jesus, which housed the Society of Jesus, Father António Vieira's

**Figure 2** Elements of Jewish presence in Coimbra and proposed Jewish Route in Coimbra



Source: Authors

residence from 1663 to 1665, became at the time a protectorate for the New Christians and would have been the first Jesuit College in the world.

Point 3 corresponds to the Numbers 18–20 of Rua Sobre Ripas. It is the house where Aristides de Sousa Mendes lived as a university student. As consul in Bordeaux he was able to grant transit visas during World War II to thousands of Jewish refugees, thereby

saving many lives. This courageous attitude has aroused interest around the world, especially among the Jewish community.

Point 4 probably corresponds to the *Almocávar* (the Jewish cemetery) razed during the reign of King Manuel I and Point 5 to the Old Jewish Quarter. Today's Rua Corpo de Deus is part of the hillside outside the wall where the oldest Jewish quarter was located. In many Portuguese cities, the Jewish quarter was located within the city walls. In Coimbra, however, it was located in the suburbs. This neighbourhood covered 4.5% of the urban area and made it one of the largest in Portugal in the 1300s (Gomes, 2003). The Old Jewish Quarter survived until the 1360s or 1370s, at which time it was partly abandoned. The New Jewish Quarter was demarcated and built around 1360–1380 (see Figure 2, Point 9).

The existence of an *Almocávar* shows the importance of this community in Coimbra. A crucial element of the Jewish community is the synagogue. In the Old Jewish Quarter, this would have been on or close to the site where the Corpo de Deus chapel was established in 1360 (Alarcão, 2009). The identification of structures dating from a period between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries concluded (with some confidence) that they were parts of the synagogue that used to stand there (Almeida & Temudo, 2013).

Praça Velha (Point 6) and Praça 8 de Maio (Point 8) are the squares where about 11,000 people were accused of being converts, and more than 400 people were burned for witchcraft, for lack of good practice and, mainly, for Judaism. These squares, besides being meeting places in the city, were the places used by the Court of the Inquisition to stage Acts of Faith.

Point 7 represents a recent important discovery. In 2013, a *mikveh* was discovered (bath for ritual immersion in water) through a structure built in a limestone cave for retaining water. Although the structure has undergone many changes over time, we can still see what its original purpose was. It is on Rua Visconde da Luz. It is about three metres deeper than the current street. It may be one of the oldest (perhaps exclusively female) ritual baths to be discovered in Europe, since there are signs that it predates the fifteenth century (Queirós, 2013). The *mikveh*, usually underground, consists of several tanks with pure spring and running water, used for the purification of the body (*halakah*); it is located in or near the synagogue building (place of community meeting, worship, social assistance and school education). In the case of Coimbra, it would probably be located nearby. This is a rare asset, and we do not know of any other preserved example in Portugal.

The partial destruction suffered by Coimbra in various wars led the Portuguese king to establish a new area to establish the New Jewish Quarter (Point 9). This Quarter also had its synagogue (Gomes, 2003; Alarcão, 2009).

In 1536, D. João III established the Court of the Holy Office of the Inquisition in Portugal with the aim of "rooting out all heresy, especially Judaism" (Andrade, 1999, p. 12). The first Coimbra Inquisition was created in 1541. Point 10 indicates the Court, which is another element associated with Judaism in Coimbra, a square now called the Pátio da Inquisição ("Inquisition Courtyard"), so named for the part it played in the Catholic Church's Court of the Inquisition between 1566 and 1821. The court actions were related to persecution, faith and religious practices; censorship of books; witchcraft; and so forth. The Coimbra Inquisition handled more than 11,000 cases; about 200 New Christians were burned to death in *Autos de Fé*.

Finally, Point 11 indicates the location where today stands the fountain known as Fonte dos Judeus, which was renamed Fonte Nova after the extinction of the Jewish Quarter. In the montage of the urban scenario of Coimbra, Alarcão (2007) refers to a document from 1151 which mentions the existence of a *magnis lapidis Judeorum* ("great rock of the Jews") on the site where Jaime Cortesão Secondary School now stands. There is a fountain there too (Alarcão, 2009). It happens that the New Fountain which was built there in 1725 is also known as the Fountain of the Jews.

Urban cultural heritage has been gaining much more relevance than was expected a few years ago, giving cities a major role in attracting tourists.

The presence of tourists is seen as an added socio-economic value; however, it is important to control the negative effects of a tourist presence that exceeds what localities can sustain. It is very important to steer tourists towards attractions other than the iconic sites.

Cultural tourism in Coimbra is reflected, however, in a shorter average stay with a lot of trips, based on the *Biblioteca Joanina* and *Portugal dos Pequenitos*.

The increase in other resources and the creation of new products that lead to sub-segments of cultural tourism (in this case, genealogical tourism) make it possible to design an additional urban tourist offer. This would imply that in their places of origin, visitors have clear information about the diversity of urban cultural attractions and that tourism management of the area matches the urban territorial management. It will thus be possible to diversify tourist attractions, which will encourage a longer stay, and spread visitors across the urban space with less likelihood of overcrowding at certain sites, so often a reason for residents' dissatisfaction. Beyond the practical implications, the study also supports the theoretical relevance of deepening knowledge on genealogical tourism, particularly the motivations and the construction of links between territories and visitors.

## 6. Conclusion

Coimbra is an important centre of Judaism in Iberia. The still visible marks of the presence of a Coimbra Jewish community in medieval times, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, seen in the urban layout of the city, in the built heritage and in its libraries, all these elements need a more thorough and systematic study; this would benefit hugely from the creation of a Hebrew heritage route in Coimbra. The rituals of this religious minority that was the target of persecution and the victim of intolerance are unique. If the Jewish contribution to Coimbra's past, which is part of the city's cultural heritage, is identified, studied and interpreted, it will help to enhance the tourist experience and creatively diversify the offer. Today, the memory spaces of the Jewish community in Coimbra go unnoticed by passers-by, residents, visitors and tourists alike. Because they are not identified, some are neither visitable nor contextualised in time and do not consistently appear in a route since they do not exist as a tourist offer but are merely random parts of undisclosed stories.

This study provides an insight into the great importance that genealogical tourism enjoys in contemporary times. In addition, it shows the value of respecting a new niche element associated with Jewish culture in a city with a rich heritage of great significance. It presents, in the context of JHT, the creation of a cultural route as an instrument for cherishing the heritage of the city's historic centre, a strategy for diversifying supply, an enrichment of the tourist experience and an extension of the stay.

The limitations of this study are that it is only concerned with the culture of the Sephardic community (Iberian Peninsula) and that it is a proposed route for a medium-sized city (on the scale of Portugal). The method used does not seek to produce findings which are generally or universally representative. These elements may affect the extrapolation of the conclusions to other JHT destinations, but equally they might also inspire the design of similar routes in other cities.

In terms of future research directions, it is envisaged that the route could be tested using interpreter guides working in the city. In addition, the route can be offered to tourists visiting the University of Coimbra to find out their interest in JHT. It is intended to create an App and take advantage of new information and communication technologies to publicise the Jewish presence in the city of Coimbra, taking the results of its use in the management of this urban destination into consideration as a future research proposal.

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### About the authors

Norberto Santos is based at the University of Coimbra, CEGOT, Faculty of Arts and Humanities. He is Full Professor at the University of Coimbra; he is Coordinator of the Tourism, Heritage and Territory Group of the Centre of Studies in Geography and Spatial Planning; Coordinator of the PhD in Tourism, Heritage and Territory of the University of Coimbra; Manager at the University of Coimbra, of the Chair in Cultural Tourism and Development, UNESCO-UNITWIN, Paris 1, Sorbonne-Phantéon. He supervised 14 doctoral theses and more than 50 master's dissertations in the areas of Tourism and Economic and Social Geography. He works in the areas of Tourism and Development, Heritage, Cohesion and Local Development, Gastronomy, Leisure and Urban Geography.

Claudete Oliveira Moreira is based at the University of Coimbra, CEGOT, Faculty of Arts and Humanities. Claudete Oliveira Moreira is geographer and assistant professor in the Department of Geography and Tourism at the University of Coimbra, Portugal. She has a PhD in Tourism, Leisure and Culture, Tourism and Development branch, from the University of Coimbra. She is a full member of the research unit CEGOT, Centre of Studies in Geography and Spatial Planning, Group Tourism, Heritage, and Territory. Her research interests are tourism, tourism system, destinations management (local, regional and national scales), heritage, leisure activities and events.

Luís Silveira is based at the University of Coimbra, CEGOT, Faculty of Arts and Humanities. He is Assistant Professor in the Department of Geography and Tourism of the University of Coimbra and researcher of CEGOT (Centre of Studies in Geography and Spatial Planning), Group 3 Tourism, Heritage, and Territory; PhD in Tourism, Leisure, and Culture, from the University of Coimbra. He is a member of the International Coastal and Marine Tourism Society and a member of the Ocean Forum – Working Group on Recreational Boating and Nautical Tourism. His research interests focus on tourism in low-density territories, nautical tourism and cultural tourism, under the vectors of transport, recreational boating, coastal activities and UNESCO's classified sites. Luís Silveira is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: [luis.silveira@uc.pt](mailto:luis.silveira@uc.pt)

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