

FROM ITALY TO JERUSALEM
R. MOSES BASOLA AND HIS TRAVELOGUE IN 1521-1523
De Italia a Jerusalén, R. Moses Basola y su itinerario en 1521-1523

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Resumen: Como consecuencia de la conquista de Palestina por los otomanos (1516) los judíos de la diáspora tuvieron la oportunidad de visitar y asentarse en la tierra de Israel. Un viajero y colono eventual fue Moses Basola, rabino italiano cuyo peregrinaje se prolongó entre 1521 y 1523. El cuaderno de notas de Moses Basola contiene detalles de su travesía por mar y tierra, así como de sus visitas a los lugares venerados en Tierra Santa, dedicando una atención muy especial a Jerusalén y a sus costumbres locales. Este itinerario se redactó en hebreo y ha sido traducido a varias lenguas europeas como el español, francés, inglés, italiano o checo. Basola diseñó originalmente su tratado como una guía útil capaz de ofrecer a peregrinos judíos de Europa occidental y potenciales colonos información provechosa para planificar su viaje a Eretz-Israel. Él intenta evitar los principales obstáculos que puedan surgirles durante la trayectoria, específicamente los que son resultado de la falta de experiencia en tierras extranjeras tan diferentes a sus lugares de origen.

Abstract: In the wake of the Ottoman conquest of the Land of Israel (1516), Jews from throughout the Diaspora now took the opportunity to visit and to settle in the Land of Israel. One such traveler and eventual settler was Rabbi Moses Basola, an Italian rabbi whose extended pilgrimage lasted from 1521 to 1523. Moses Basola's informative diary imparts the details of his sea and land journey and of his visits to venerated sites in the Land of Israel, devoting distinct attention to Jerusalem and its local customs. This itinerary was written in Hebrew and has been translated into some European languages, such as: Spanish, French, English, Italian and Czech. Basola envisioned his treatise primarily as a useful guide whose purpose was to provide western European Jewish pilgrims and potential settlers in Eretz-Israel with helpful information for planning their voyage to Eretz-Israel. He attempts to remove potential obstacles from their path, particularly those based on lack of experience in foreign places so different from their homelands.

Palabras clave: Judaísmo, Libros de Viajes, Basola.

Key words: Judaism, Travel Books, Basola.

There are some Hebrew travelogues from the Late Middle Ages which have been written by Italian Jewish pilgrims or newcomers who settled in

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the Land of Israel. Such as: R. Meshullam of Volterra a Florentian trader who visited the Land of Israel in 1481.¹ R. Obadia of Bertinoro, the well known Mishnah commentator who started his maritime journey from Napoli in the end of 1486 and arrived in Jerusalem in April 1488. He describes his journey in a letter to his father in Italy shortly afterward.² An anonymous traveler who embarked from Venice for the Middle East and arrived in Jerusalem in 1495 describes his journey in a letter shortly after his arrival.³ The last Hebrew travelogues in this series is the itinerary of R. Moses Basola from Ancona (Eastern Italy) who made his pilgrimage in the Land of Israel in the years 1521-1523. On this traveler and his itinerary I would like to discuss in this article.

Nine years ago I have published a critical edition of Basola's itinerary entitled "In Zion and Jerusalem", in Hebrew: *Eretz Zion v-Yerushalayim*. This is a bilingual edition. The original Hebrew text which has been published before⁴ with English translation.⁵ The introduction and scholarly notes are in English only.

1. BASOLA'S BIOGRAPHY

Moses Basola who belonged to a French family was born in Italy, presumably in 1480. His exact birthplace is, however, not known. From the age of nine he resided in Soncino, where his father, Mordecai ben

1. A Hebrew critical edition of this text has been published by Yaari, 1948. There are translated editions into European languages, such as: Adler, 1927: 156-208; Magdalena, 1987: 11-17, 41-100; Veronese, 1989. On Meshullam's travelogue, see: Veronese, 1992: 45-66.

2. Two Hebrew editions of this text have been published: Yaari, 1971: 98-127; A critical edition by Artom – David, 1988: 24-81 (Hebrew section). A new edition came out separately: Artom – David, 1997: 7-64. There are translated editions into European languages, such as: Adler, 1927: 209-234; Magdalena, 1987: 21-28, 101-129; Busi, 1991: 7-48; Harboun, 1988: 143-198.

3. Two Hebrew editions of this text have been published: Yaari, 1971: 144-160; A critical edition – David, 2003: 142-170. Translated editions into European languages: Sachs, 1863; Magdalena, 1987: 29-31, 151-168.

4. The first critical edition has been published by Ben-Zevi, 1938.

5. David, 1999. Five years ago An Italian translation (without the Hebrew text) has been published: David, 2003. There are two other European editions of this itinerary: Magdalena, 1987: 33-38, 169-216; Harboun, 1994: 9-138.

Reuben Basola, was employed as a proofreader in the Joshua Soncino press.⁶

Although we can trace Moses Basola's relocations in various cities in central and northern Italy as an adult, but we can not establish a precise chronology of these moves. One thing is certain: as his travel book indicates, from late summer 1521 to spring 1523 he was on his pilgrimage to Eretz-Israel. Before embarking on this trip he evidently lived in Fano, where he expounded Torah. In a letter to a former student, Basola assessed the level of scholarship there.

At an unknown date Basola moved to Pesaro, where he was employed as a teacher and as tutor in the household of the eminent banker Rabbi Moses Nissim of Foligno, who was then residing in Pesaro. In 1535 or shortly thereafter Moses Basola received Rabbinical ordination from Rabbi Azriel Diena in Sabionetta. Basola moved to Ancona. During his lengthy stay here, Basola headed the yeshivah (Jewish academy). From the honorifics: "Rosh ha-Golah" (exilarch) and "a commander of peoples in the holy congregations of the Marches" with which he was addressed, we can infer that not only did Basola hold the prestigious position of head of the Ancona yeshivah, but also that he served as the district rabbi. But, Basola's interests were not restricted to the rabbinic sphere. The combination of fiscal activity and rabbinic office was not rare among Italian rabbis in the Renaissance period.⁷ A recently discovered Latin document by my colleague Dr. Aaron di Leone Leoni indicates that Basola fit this mold. He was involved in financial ventures with his son Azriel, and from 1554 owned a bank in the city of Rocca in the Marches.⁸ This facet of his personality finds expression in the text of the travel book in the close attention paid to currencies and exchange rates, as we will see later.

From mid-1557 to mid-June 1558 Basola was in Pesaro. Evidently, at a later date he returned to Ancona where he remained until leaving Italy permanently, as we will see later. While serving in the rabbinate of Ancona and the surrounding district, Basola also took an intense interest in public affairs, on both the local and international levels. Not only did he

6. See: David, 1999: 14; David, 2003: 12.

7. On his biographical details see: David, 1999: 14-20; David, 2003: 11-17.

8. See: David, 1999: 16-17; David, 2003: 14-15.

promote local efforts to raise money for the purpose of ransoming a group of “Safed captives” who had been seized while en route from Salonika to Eretz-Israel in 1554,⁹ he also took a strong stand against the planned international boycott of Ancona promoted by the Ottoman sultan’s courtiers, Don Joseph Nasi and Dona Gracia Nasi. The courtiers’ plan to shift the center of commerce between Italy and the East from Ancona to Pesaro was sparked by Pope Paul IV’s execution of twenty-five conversos who had settled in Ancona. Basola joined other rabbinic figures and the Anconan and Levantine merchants whose livelihood was threatened (and who feared the wrath of the local authorities) in opposing the shortlived boycott that began in July 1556.¹⁰ Basola himself sent a letter to Constantinople (most likely addressed to the moving spirits behind the boycott, namely, Dona Gracia and Don Joseph Nasi), requesting its cancellation. The strong opposition to the boycott apparently contributed to its brevity.¹¹

In 1560 Basola sailed from Venice for Eretz-Israel as the famous Jewish Italian historian Gedaliah ibn Yahya reports: “Rabbi Moses Basola...went to Eretz-Israel and died there in [5]320 [1560] at the age of eighty.”¹² He received a warm welcome in Safed upon his arrival and was given due honor by its sages. It seems likely that his nephew, the noted kabbalist Mordecai Dato, accompanied him to Safed. Basola died shortly thereafter and we have no further information concerning this brief period of residence in Safed.¹³

We have already seen that Moses Basola was more than a teacher and mentor. He took a central role in some of the halakhic debates and affairs that electrified Jewish society in Italy and elsewhere. For example, He was deeply involved in the dispute over the printing of Kabbalistic works which was significantly in Italy in the years 1557-1558. Although, Basola’s halakhic decisions have never been collected, some have been preserved as independent documents while others have been appended as approbations to rabbinic decisions issued in his day. Both types can be

9. See: See: David, 1999: 18-20; David, 2003: 15-17.

10. On this case, see: Aelion, 2002: 335-364.

11. See Lamdan, 1988: 135-154.

12. See: Gedaliah Ibn Yahya, 1587: 65v.

13. See David, 1999: 19; David, 2003: 16-17.

found in the collected responsa (published and manuscript versions) of his contemporaries.¹⁴

Basola's intense interest also in kabbalah. The famous Rabbinical figure (1571-1648) R. Judah Aryeh Modena testified that Basola was "a great sage in kabbalah,"¹⁵ but no kabbalistic works by Basola are extant however, with the exception of a recently discovered short commentary of apocalyptic work. It appears that Basola also wrote sermons with mystical content.

Basola's contacts in the world of kabbalah extended to Christian kabbalists. He was particularly close to the French-Christian kabbalist and Hebraist Guillaume Postel, who translated the Zohar into Latin.

The fact that Basola took an active interest in messianic and apocalyptic matters is indeed clear, and not only from the above discussion. He even made a specific prediction that the "end of days", namely redemption would occur between 1575 and 1578. Moreover, during his travels Basola evinced interest in each and every rumor concerning the location of the Ten Tribes and the Sambatyon River, devoting an entire section to this topic. The search for the Ten Tribes and the Sambatyon river was linked to the messianic expectations that repeatedly sprang up in Eretz-Israel during that period.¹⁶

2. BASOLA'S TRAVEL BOOK

The book we know as Moses Basola's itinerary first appeared in Livorno 1785 in a collection of treatises called *Shivhei Yerushalayim* (In Praise of Jerusalem). Since that time *Shivhei Yerushalayim* has been published at least six times. Our itinerary always appeared as anonymous treatise and the sole extant manuscript version of this treatise earlier than the printed editions is housed in the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem.¹⁷ Our treatise was evidently copied by an anonymous scribe some time during the latter half of the sixteenth century. Like the printed editions this manuscript contains no ascription. With the publication of the Isaac Ben-Zvi edition of this travel book in

14. See: David, 1999: 20-25; David, 2003: 17-22.

15. See: Libowitz, 1929: 84.

16. David, 1999: 25-28; David, 2003: 22-24.

17. Ms. JNUL, Heb. 8^o 1783, fol. 64v-91v.

Jerusalem 1938 based on the above-mentioned manuscript, the identity of its author was definitively established.¹⁸

3. THE JOURNEY

Basola, whose conspicuous powers of literary expression can hardly fail to impress the reader, clearly describes his journey and his visit to Eretz-Israel in strict chronological order. The book opens with his departure from Venice for the East by ship on 17 Elul 5281 (21 August 1521) and concludes with his embarkation from the borders of Eretz-Israel, from Beirut, “on the sixth day of Passover” 5283 (5 April 1523).¹⁹ Based on allusions to events that occurred near the journey’s end, I surmise that Basola took notes throughout his journey and that the book received its final form upon his return to Italy. On the other hand, we must note that unlike some other pilgrim accounts, Basola provides no information on his homeward journey, which may indicate that he finished his treatise soon after embarking for Italy. Or, perhaps it reflects his intent (to be discussed below) to write a guidebook for pilgrims bound for Eretz-Israel. Consequently, he felt no need to devote space to his return journey.

Basola’s account opens with a fairly detailed but altogether lively and readable description of his experiences during the sea and overland legs of his journey whose authenticity is unmistakable. Like other travelers, he not only provides geographical data for the places he passed through en route, he adds interesting details regarding the Jewish communities in each. He also describes the ship on which he sailed east and its accompanying fleet the nature of the cargo on board, and the conditions at sea; for example, storms that both determined the route and/or caused delays. Basola devotes space to the prevailing economic conditions in the places he visited during the journey, citing prices, availability of certain food items, the common crops, etc. and providing information on the local currency as expressed in its Venetian equivalents. He also notes the special taxes the Muslim regime imposed on its Jewish subjects. He devotes space to descriptions of local commerce and crafts. Nor does Basola hesitate to introduce a personal note, for example, his detailed

18. See: Ben-Zvi, 1938: 11-12; David, 1999: 28-29; David, 2003: 24-26.

19. See: David, 1999: 30-38; David, 2003: 26-33.

description of the severe injury he accidentally suffered while traveling overland from Tyre to Safed, from which he recovered in the space of a few days.

Basola's sea journey took him first through various Adriatic port cities and then to islands in the Aegean; he sailed via Venice, Pola, Lissa (on the Slavonian coast), Saseno, Corfu, Cephalonia, Zante, Modone, Canea (Crete), Paphos (Cyprus), Famagusta (Cyprus), and Tripoli.²⁰ This was evidently the most common sea route from Venice to the East. When occasional deviations from this route occurred, they could result either from weather conditions, the need to load or unload goods at various ports off the usual route, or the ever present threat of piracy in the Mediterranean basin. The Venice-Tripoli leg of the journey took Basola a month, from the "17th of Elul [23 August 1521] to 23 Tishri [23 September 1521]."

From Tripoli, Basola continued his journey overland to Eretz-Israel on 29 Tishri (29 September) 1521. He proceeded south via the coastal road, making stops en route to Safed at Beirut, Batroun, Sidon, Sarafand, Tyre, and Mashuk. We must note, however, that other options were available to the traveler en route from Tripoli to the Galilee via Damascus.²¹

Basola's travels within Eretz-Israel proper began in Safed, where he remained for a week, from Tuesday, the 14th of Marheshvan, until Tuesday, the 21st of Marheshvan (15-22 October) 1521. Basola provides rich detail concerning Safed, describing its geographical setting and his impression of the city's solid economic base: its diversified industrial and commercial enterprise, in which its more than three hundred Jewish households played an central role.²²

4. VENERATED GRAVESITES

But Basola the tourist had a more defined goal in mind when he embarked upon his travels in Eretz-Israel, he specifically sought out venerated gravesites.

In Jewish and Muslim folklore the ziyara, that is, prostration at the graves of saints (biblical figures, tannaim, and amoraim) was seen as a

20. See: David, 1999: 47-55; David, 2003: 41-48.

21. See: David, 1999: 55-61; David, 2003: 48-54.

22. See: David, 1999: 61-64; David, 2003: 54-56.

religious ritual and the gravesites with their monuments were purportedly endowed with miraculous powers. During the medieval period and down to the present, various ceremonies, some of which were linked to specific dates, were held at these holy sites. The institution of the veneration of saints and its attendant rituals were current in Basola's day and remained so for generations.²³

Basola visited Jerusalem twice. His first visit lasted for three weeks, from Monday, the 11th of Kislev (11 November) until the 1st of Tevet (1 December) 1521. He then proceeded south to Hebron, less than a day's journey away, noting Hebron's small Jewish presence, only eight or ten households. He returned to Jerusalem two days later, on the 3rd of Tevet (3 December). His second stay in Jerusalem lasted for four weeks, until the 1st of Shevat (30 December) 1521.²⁴ During this period, he rented a room in "Pilate's House" which was located near the northwestern corner of the Temple Mount. Christian tradition viewed this building as the residence of the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate, as the spot where Jesus' tribulations began. By the way we have had the drawing of the Pilate House which has been done by Fra Bernardino Amico, in his book: "Trattato delle pianteet imagini dei sacri edificii di Terra Santa" (Plans of the Sacred Edifices of the Holy Land), which came out for the first time in Rome 1559.²⁵ It is not clear whether Basola resided here during his initial stay in the city.

Jerusalem was the highlight of Basola's pilgrimage and the length of Basola's description is in accordance with its importance. He starts with a physical portrait of the city, first describing the graves of the prophets, located by Jewish tradition in the Valley of Jehoshaphat (Kidron Valley) and on the Mount of Olives, and the gravesites of the kings on Mount Zion. He then proceeds to delineate at length and in great detail the ancient urban configuration of the city: various sites on the Temple Mount-Midrash Shelomo, the Temple Gates, the surrounding wall, the Western Wall, Mount Zion, the Siloah Spring, the Citadel of David, the

23. This topic in the Jewish tradition was discussed deeply and widely by Reiner, 1988: 215-340.

24. See: David, 1999: 32-36, 64-72; David, 2003: 28-31, 56-63.

25. The last English edition of this book *Plans of the Sacred Edifices of the Holy Land* came out recently in Jerusalem 1997. The Pilate's House drawing is located, *ibid*: 79 and also in: David, 1999: 80; David, 2003: 70.

city gates and bazaars etc. Alongside these prosaic descriptions Basola incorporated various traditions he absorbed from local informants.

Basola also provided a splendid portrait of Jerusalem's Jewish community: its location, from Mount Zion until near the Temple; its size, some three hundred households; its congregational division: Ashkenazim, many Sefardim, Mustarabs, and Maarabiim; its economic status; and its institutions, the synagogue (later mistakenly ascribed to Nahmanides) and the Yeshivot. At that juncture, two Yeshivot operated in the city, one for Sefardim headed by David ibn Shoshan and Abraham ha-Levi, and the other for Ashkenazim, headed by Rabbi Israel and Rabbi Peretz.²⁶

5. APPENDIXES

Basola did not confine himself simply to a description of his travels. To his travel book he appended several additional sections devoted to matters in which he took a personal interest during his stay in Eretz-Israel and their inclusion again highlights the firsthand character of his account, such as: Jerusalemite regulations and local customs; Traditions related to the Ten Tribes and the Sambatyon River and personal prayers.²⁷

The concluding section of Basola's travel book contains useful shipboard advice to travelers embarking for Eretz-Israel from Venice.²⁸ As he announces in the beginning: "He who desires to go to the land of life [Eretz-Israel] via seafaring ship should sail on a Venetian galley only, for they are safe from Corsairs and storms at sea." He advises the traveler where to find a comfortable cabin, at the same time noting what to avoid: the cargo hold, for example. He dispenses practical advice regarding the water supply: it is best that the passenger himself refill the barrels at each port. It is also advisable to pay the water captain two or three marchetti to keep the barrels filled, whereas a payment of two or three marcelli to the cook will ensure that he makes room for the Jewish traveler's pot. Basola also suggests that Jewish travelers pay the comito, the top deck officer responsible for the sailors, a ducat, so that "he will look after them and deliver them from the ill-disposed ones among them." Similar and even more detailed advice of this nature is found in other travel books,

26. See: David, 1999: 36-37, 72-84; David, 2003: 31-32, 63-74.

27. See: David, 1999: 100-116; David, 2003: 88-99.

28. See: David, 1999: 115-116; David, 2003: 97-99.

Christian and Jewish alike. These pilgrim accounts include descriptions of the realia of the times and shipping routes, the route from Venice, distances between ports, length of stay in each port, and the like technical information on the structure of the ship, with emphasis where the best cabins are located, advice on how to obtain food and its quality, and further data concerning the captain and the crew. In this respect Basola's itinerary belongs to a larger genre.²⁹

6. CONCLUSION

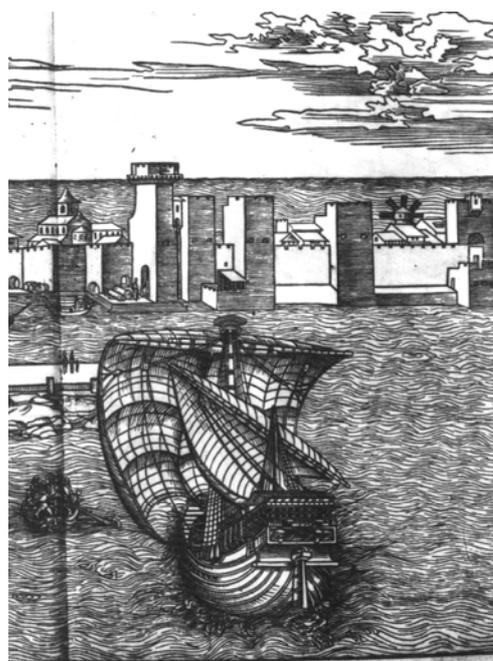
It appears that for a deeper underlying motivation for Basola's pilgrimage we must take a closer look at the role of messianic expectations in his life. I have already noted Basola's intense interest in apocalyptic calculating and his expectation that the messianic age would soon commence, an interest that found expression both in Basola's curiosity regarding the early stage of signs of redemption that took place in 1519 on the Temple Mount when the half moon on the Mosque of Omar changed direction, instead of facing south (Mecca), it turned to the east. The second was the toppling of a tree that according to Muslim tradition had been planted by Mohammed.³⁰ Also in his attempts to make inquiries concerning the descendants of the Ten Tribes.³¹

We cannot dismiss Basola's book simply as a travel diary that records the impressions of the pilgrim as he prays at a venerated gravesite or enjoys in Jerusalem's unique urban atmosphere. Rather, Basola envisioned his treatise primarily as a useful guide whose purpose was to provide western European Jewish pilgrims and potential settlers in Eretz-Israel with helpful information for planning their voyage to Eretz-Israel. He attempts to remove potential obstacles from their path, particularly those based on lack of experience in foreign places so different from their homelands. We must also note that improved conditions in Eretz-Israel consequent upon the Ottoman conquest provided an impetus for pilgrims and settlers to make their way east.

29. See: David, 1992: 321-329.

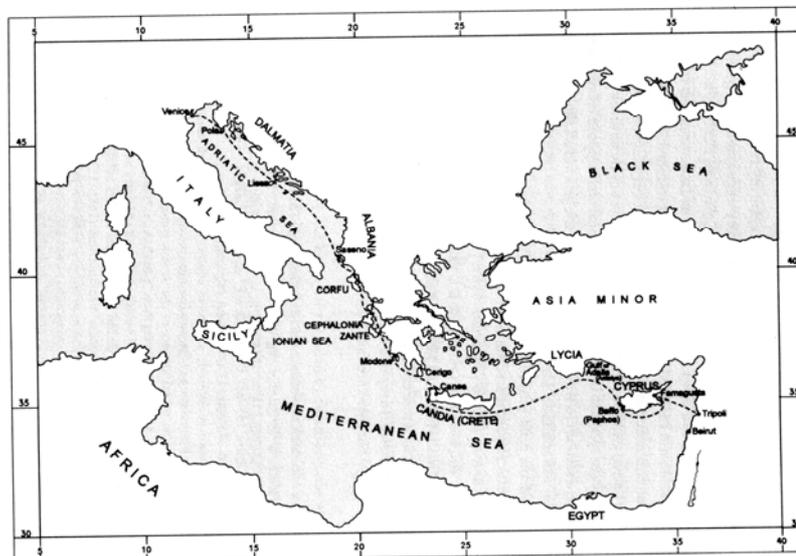
30. See David, 1999: 109-110; David, 2003: 96-97. The same signs were also mentioned by R. Abraham ha-Levi of Jerusalem in his letter of redemption to Italy and other sources at the same time, see: David, 1979: 53-55, 59-60.

31. See: David, 1999: 95-96, 107-110; David, 2003: 83-84, 95-97.

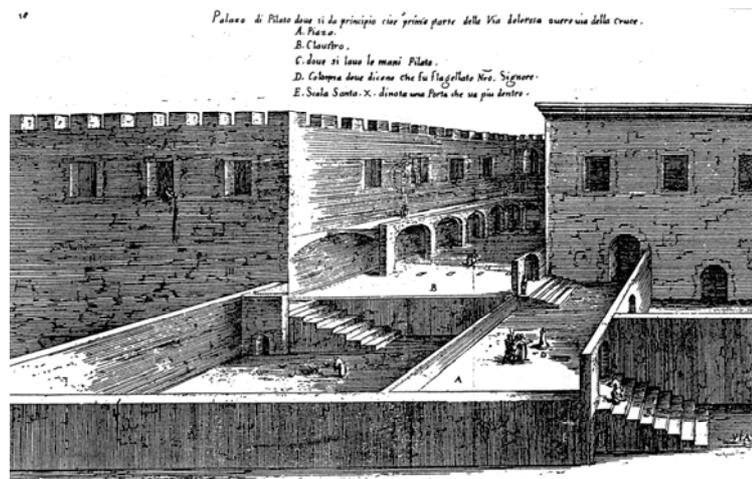


Drawing of a galley

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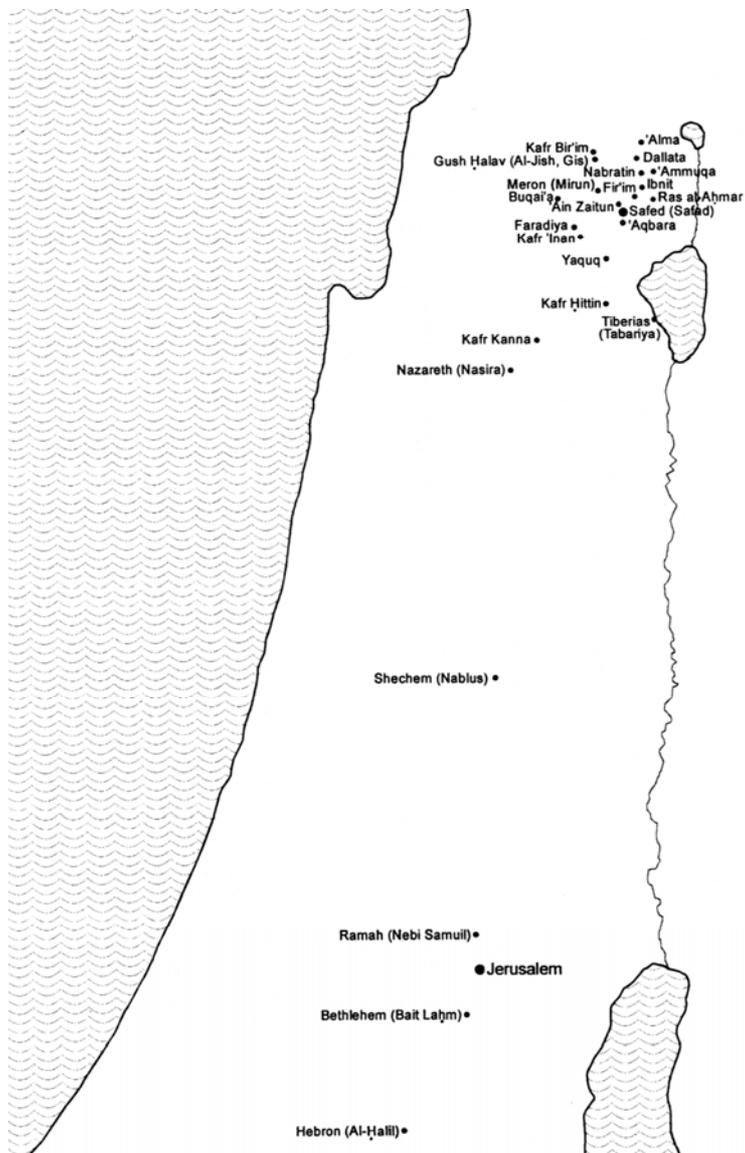


Basola's maritime route from Venice Tripoli (1521)
Map by Miriam Waldman

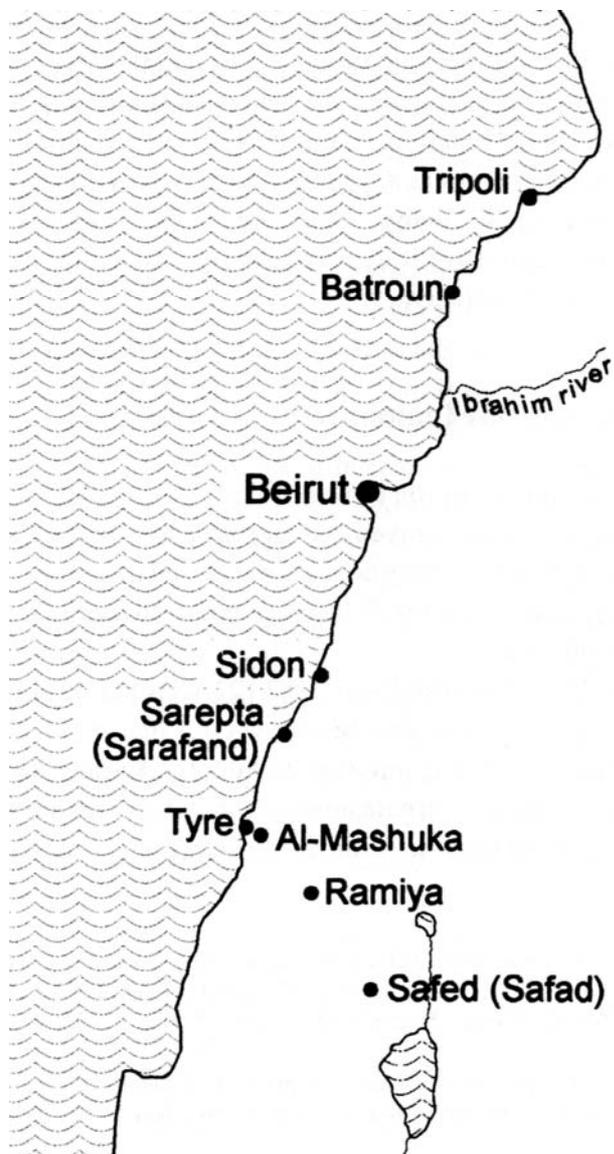


Pilate's House

From a drawing in Fra Bernardino Amico, *Plans of the Sacred Edifices of the Holy Land* (Jerusalem, 1953)



Venerated gravesites in Eretz-Israel
Map by Miriam Waldman



Basola's land route from Tripoli to Safed
Map by Miriam Waldman

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