

JEWISH COSTUMES IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE OVERVIEW

Throughout history, clothing has transcended its purely functional purpose, and has also served as a means for the projecting of a certain image. As a result, dress has become an important cultural barometer, reflecting upon the particular tastes of the person wearing the garment as well as the society in which the individual lived and the prevailing social mores and customs. Historians thus study the costumes of generations past in recognition of the important and symbolic role that they played in the lives of the people who wore them, in the hope that it will offer a window into their lives.

The following illustrations of Jewish modes of dress during the Ottoman Empire are based upon the engravings or pictures of travelers and artists who recorded their impressions of the Jews in this time period. It is important to note that these drawings were not necessarily accurate or reflecting historical truths, but often were influenced by the traveler's imagination or perception of the exotic Orient. In addition, the native artists who drew images of the Jews of their era were also not bound to produce an authentic reproduction.

Dress played an especially prominent role within the Ottoman Empire, as it was an important indicator of social status, religious affiliation and etiquette. Hence, great importance was placed on the article of clothing's preparation, design, fabric quality and decoration. Jewish dress in the Ottoman Empire reflected the Jews' unique status in that society as an integrated minority, but one that nevertheless maintained its distinctiveness as a result of internal choice and external restrictions. Obligated by religious laws to preserve their uniqueness, the Jews chose to distinguish themselves in the type of clothing they wore. In addition, the Sultans demanded a clear differentiation between the dress of Muslims and non-Muslims, and specifically required that non-Muslims' attire be inferior to that of Muslims. The Sultans therefore issued the following decrees:

- Jews were only allowed to wear dark, drab colors, and the holy green color of Islam was restricted from their wardrobe altogether.
- In addition, the quality of the fabric used by Jews was not allowed to be more luxurious or of a higher quality than that worn by Muslims.
- Furthermore, the actual cut and physical size of the turbans and robes Jews wore had to comply with certain, specific rules to make them easily distinguishable from those worn by the Muslim majority.

Excerpt from: Jewish Costumes in the Ottoman Empire, by Amalia S. Levi