

ABSTRACT

‘THE HOLY ISLAND OF CHIOS’: NEW FINDINGS CONCERNING  
THE PURPORTED BURIAL PLACE OF R. YA‘AKOV BEN  
ASHER (BA‘AL HA-TURIM) ON THE ISLAND OF CHIOS AND  
PILGRIMAGES TO HIS GRAVESITE

Dov Cohen

R. Ya‘akov ben Asher (circa 1270-1343) is regarded as one of the greatest Jewish sages of all times. He was born in Germany but spent most of his life in Spain. His comprehensive halachic work, *Arba‘ah Turim*, cemented his place in the Jewish world just behind Rambam’s *Mishneh Torah*, and he became known as Ba‘al Ha-Turim.

There are two different opinions about Ba‘al Ha-Turim’s burial place: the scientific view which claims that he was buried in Toledo, Spain, and the popular folk tradition which maintains that he was buried on the Greek island of Chios. As a result of this folk tradition, the gravestone attributed to him in Chios as well as the island’s cemetery became a pilgrimage site for Jews from the surrounding areas. Furthermore, numerous stories and legends have arisen around Ba‘al Ha-Turim and the holy site in Chios. Specifically, in Ladino literature and folklore from the early nineteenth century he is referred to as a miracle worker. A number of special prayers were composed to be recited over Ba‘al Ha-Turim’s gravesite in Chios, and several even appeared in print during the mid-nineteenth century. Members of the local Jewish community would make vows to visit the gravesite as a way of ensuring the acceptance of their prayers and supplications, a rare practice among Turkish and Balkan Jewry.

In this article, we focus on the two conflicting traditions concerning Ba‘al Ha-Turim’s burial place. We discuss the sources suggesting that he was buried in Spain and examine their credibility. In contrast, in light of various new findings we recently discovered, we describe the spread and extent of the popular tradition that he was buried in Chios, and we examine the way this tradition and belief affected private and communal life in the surrounding area, in Turkey, and in the Balkans.