

EURAMERICA Vol. 40, No. 1 (March 2010), 103-131
http://euramerica.ea.sinica.edu.tw/
© Institute of European and American Studies, Academia Sinica

The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela, Lost Israelites, and Vanishing Indians: Trans-Atlantic English Reception of the Medieval Past in the Seventeenth Century

Margaret Kim

Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, National Tsing Hua University
No. 101, Sec. 2, Kuang-Fu Road, Hsinchu 30013, Taiwan
E-mail: kim@mx.nthu.edu.tw

Abstract

This essay is an investigation of the history of books on Jewish identity and the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel, in terms of their reception in an early modern Anglophone world of trans-Atlantic colonial expansion. It examines three texts, *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela* (Benjamin of Tudela, 1173/1983), *The Hope of Israel* (Menasseh ben Israel, 1650/1987), and *Jews in America* (Thorowgood, 1650). *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela* (hereafter referred to as *The Itinerary*) is an account of a medieval European Jew's travels eastward to the border regions of China between 1159 and 1172. In the seventeenth-century trans-Atlantic Anglophone world, *The Itinerary* began to be read in connection with *The Hope of Israel* and *Jews in America*, works that promoted the idea that native Americans were the Lost Tribes, written respectively by a Jewish and a Protestant author. The essay asks why *The Itinerary*, a twelfth-century Jewish travel account largely unread by and unknown to

Received April 3, 2009; accepted July 3, 2009; last revised August 6, 2009
Proofreaders: Chih-wei Wu, Ko-Hua Chen, Ying-tzu Chang

medieval Christian Europeans, began to be read by the English on both sides of the Atlantic in the early modern era and to be associated with writings locating the Lost Tribes in the Americas. It argues that the English debate and dialogue on the historical understanding of the ethnic other as *difference* and the role of *difference* in projects of colonization and expansion underlie the connection between these three discourses and their reception in the seventeenth century.

Key Words: colonization, Jews, Americas, Lost Tribes, Indians