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## JUDAISM IN ITALY AND THE WEST

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In the absence of substantial historical and literary records, an overview of Judaism in the western territories of the Roman empire from the first to the fifth century necessarily relies on epigraphic and archaeological documentation. The limits imposed by the fragmentary state of the material evidence, however, and the random circumstances of its preservation, frustrate any attempt – or temptation – to paint a detailed picture of a reality that must have been internally varied and not always in step with the evolution of rabbinic Judaism in Palestine and Mesopotamia.

From the formative period of the Jewish communities in the West down to the third and fourth centuries, when the Jewish population of Italy and the Iberian Peninsula became a significant component of local society, the western branch of ancient Judaism developed far away from its homeland. Furthermore, Jewish communities in the West were under continuous pressure from a politically and culturally hegemonic environment that rejected, at least in principle, any innovation regarded as barbaric or, in any case, alien. Not surprisingly, Judaism in the West maintained a degree of independence from Palestinian Judaism, with which it began to conform – although the trend was not uniform – only from the fifth century onward and mainly in reaction to the growing success of Christianity.

### ROME

The date and circumstances of the appearance of the first Jewish communities in Italy – presumably around the middle of the second century BCE – are still shrouded in uncertainty. 2 Macc 4:1 seems to suggest that the first official contacts between Judea and Rome dated as far back as 174 BCE. However, the earliest securely dated contacts occurred in 161 BCE, the year of the treaties ratified between Rome and the Hasmonean princes and later

renewed in 142 (1 Macc 8:17–30; 15:15–17). Although no sources mention a Jewish community in the capital or anywhere else in Italy at this time, by then groups of Jews must have already settled in Rome. In 139 BCE, the *praetor peregrinus* Cn. Cornelius Hispanus repatriated them – together with some astrologers, probably Babylonian – under the accusation of having attempted to spread their religious practices. His act suggests that the local Jewish community was mercantile rather than residential in character. Because the episode, related by Valerius Maximus, survives only in two slightly different epitomes, neither the context nor any other details are known. But the subsequent sending of delegations to Rome under John Hyrcanus between 134 and 112 BCE may be an indication that by that time the crisis had abated (Josephus, *Ant.* 13.260, 266; 14.145–8, 247–55).

The number of Jews in Italy rose suddenly in 63–61 BCE, when Pompey brought back many slaves following his conquest of Judea, including the former pretender to the throne Aristobulus II and his supporters. After the Roman conquest, many more Jews were reduced to slavery under several governors, including Cassius Longinus in 53 (Josephus, *J. W.* 1.8.9). Once Judea fell under direct Roman control, deteriorating relations between the two nations affected even the religious domain. Pompey's sacrilegious entry into the Jerusalem temple was long remembered as one of Rome's most serious affronts to the Jewish cult. Conversely, the Jews' attachment to their traditions and exclusive ritual practices often earned them the accusation of *misanthropia* among the Romans.<sup>1</sup> Given this climate of mutual hostility, one is hardly surprised by Cicero's contemptuous description of a multitude of unruly Roman Jews – apparently an influential lobby – attending the trial of the governor of Asia, L. Valerius Flaccus, in 59 BCE. Among other things, Flaccus was accused of having prevented the sending of funds to the temple of Jerusalem. While heaping scorn on the Jews' *barbara superstitio*, Cicero also informs us that it was a well-established custom at the time to send money to the Temple from Italy. Significantly, in the same period, Varro (quoted in Augustine, *Civ.* 4.31) bears witness to a degree of benevolence toward Judaism. In Varro's case, it was inspired by the "purity" of the Jews' aniconic cult, which for Varro represented *religio* in all respects.

Having sided with the *populares*, the Jews were unaffected by Julius Caesar's decree banning religious *collegia* from Rome (except for the ones established earlier, which were granted the right to assemble, send money

<sup>1</sup> Schäfer, *Judaeophobia*; for deteriorating Jewish perception of Rome, see Hadas-Lebel, *Jérusalem contre Rome*.

to their homelands, and take their meals in common). Many Jews visited the dictator's funeral pyre in gratitude. Octavian later confirmed their religious privileges (Suetonius, *Jul.* 42; 84.5; *Aug.* 32). Judging from the surviving names, there were at least three synagogues in Rome in Julio-Claudian times. They belonged, respectively, to the *Herodiani*, the *Agrippenses*, and the *Augustenses*. To these we must add the synagogue in Ostia, the only one that was certainly active in that period.

It is commonly believed that during the early empire, there were only a few thousand Jews in Rome, out of an estimated population of about one million inhabitants. The evidence, however, is rather scarce. Flavius Josephus, for example, mentions 8,000 Roman Jews who mobilized against Archelaus, heir to Herod the Great (*Ant.* 17.300). First described by Tacitus, Tiberius's expulsion from the city of 4,000 descendants of freedmen, whom he sent away to Sardinia to fight bandits, probably included converts, and members of the Egyptian cults, as well as Jews (*Tac. Ann.* 2.85; *Suet. Tib.* 36). First-century sources report that the Jews of Rome were numerous, but of destitute condition and mostly belonging to the servile class. The Alexandrian philosopher Philo observes that Rome's many Jews, most of whom resided in Trastevere, were former war captives (*Legat.* 155 [23]). The arrival of captives from the war of 68–71 CE must have increased their numbers. According to Josephus, 97,000 people were captured during that campaign. Of these, those under the age of seventeen were reduced to slavery, and at least 700 were selected and sent to Rome for Titus's triumph (Josephus, *J.W.* 6.417–20). Scholars have proposed widely diverging approximations of the size of Rome's Jewish community. For the first century, the estimates were once rather high, between 10,000 and 60,000 individuals. More recent studies based on reexaminations of the archaeological record, however, hypothesize an average of only 500 individuals from the first to the fourth century.<sup>2</sup> This estimate is based on quantitative data deduced from some of the five or six surviving Jewish catacombs. Because it is likely that several more Jewish cemeteries existed, the accuracy of this figure is subject to question.

The first witness to the presence of Palestinian emissaries in Italy dates back to 94/95 CE. In that year, according to written sources, a delegation of four, headed by Gamaliel II, came to Rome, paid a visit to Theudas (or Todos), the capital's main religious leader, and reproached him for not scrupulously following the current precepts of Judea (*y. Mo'ed Qat.* 3.1,

<sup>2</sup> Solin, "Juden und Syrer," 698–9, n. 240; McGing, "Population and Proselytism"; Rutgers, "Nuovi dati."

etc.). The principate of Domitian (81–96 CE) was marked by special hostility against the Jews. The aversion to Judaism already visible in the writings of Latin authors such as Quintilian and Martial was in the second century at least partly a reaction to the rebellions that had spread in North Africa and the East ever since 116, and especially the increasing attraction exerted by Judaism on large sectors of Roman society, including the ruling classes. This attraction apparently went hand in hand with active proselytism; because Judaism could not be readily integrated into the Roman tradition, proselytism made the Jewish cult – and Christianity along with it – especially odious in the eyes of those who defended traditional customs against all *externae superstitiones*. The poet Juvenal adopted this attitude, as did the historian Tacitus, who has left us a very negative portrait of Jewish religious *instituta* (*Hist.* 5.5). Tensions created by the steady growth of the Jewish population in the capital were aggravated by a concomitant increase in the number of sympathizers adopting typically Jewish customs – for example, the Sabbath and dietary restrictions. There must have been even less tolerance for the growing number of converts. The latter differed from mere sympathizers in not shrinking from circumcision, a practice abhorrent to Roman traditionalists.

The end of the revolt of 132–35 CE probably brought to Italy many other captives and, according to rabbinic sources, voluntary exiles and scholars as well. On that occasion, a Mattiah ben Heresh reportedly settled in Rome, founding there an academy of Jewish studies (*b. Sanh.* 32b, etc.).<sup>3</sup> Modern scholars have cast doubt on literary traditions about Palestinian sages moving to and remaining in Rome in the first and second centuries. Although these doubts may sometimes be excessive, it is undeniable that the rabbinic account of Roman Judaism in that period is an a posteriori construction. Nor should it distort our understanding of Judaism in Rome. Although literary evidence temporarily wanes at the end of the second century, we begin to see evidence at this time from the Jewish catacombs in Rome.<sup>4</sup> Their variety bears witness to the highly heterogeneous character of local Jewish society. While the complexity of this society's cultural and spiritual orientations still largely eludes us, it can neither be denied nor constrained into halakhic categories unsuitable both to the context and to the period.

Considering the scarcity and ambiguity of written sources, epigraphs are of primary importance for our knowledge of Judaism in the western diaspora in the first few centuries of the common era. Fortunately, Italy

<sup>3</sup> Bokser, "Todos and Rabbinic Authority"; Segal, "R. Matiah ben Heresh of Rome."

<sup>4</sup> Rutgers et al., "Sul problema."

has yielded an abundant epigraphic record comprising, outside Rome, about two hundred inscriptions scattered over the entire national territory. Within current borders, they are mostly concentrated in southern Italy. The catacombs of Rome alone (Monteverde, Villa Torlonia, Vigna Randanini, Conte Cimarra, Via Casilina, and possibly that of Via Appia Pignatelli) have yielded about six hundred epigraphs – about 30 percent of all Jewish inscriptions in the entire Mediterranean area.<sup>5</sup> Any attempt, however provisional, to define the history and character of Judaism in ancient and late antique Italy must, therefore, take account of the abundant and still sometimes overlooked evidence of epigraphic sources. Regrettably, Rome has thus far yielded almost exclusively funerary inscriptions, which can rarely be securely dated. And unlike nearby Ostia, there are no epigraphic or archaeological testimonies about Jewish public life.

The eleven different synagogue communities attested in the city, probably all active at the same time, reflect the diversity of Roman Judaism. Each had its own specific designation, the meaning of which in some cases is uncertain. Several, as we have seen above, were named after illustrious patrons (as in the case of the synagogues of the *Herodiani*, the *Augustenses*, the *Agrippenses*, and the *Volumnenses*); others took their name from their location in the city (*Calcarenses*, *Campenses*, *Sekènoi*, *Suburenses*); and others still were named after the community's place of origin (*Elaei*, *Tripolitani*, and possibly *Vernaculi*). The debated meaning of the expression "synagogue of the Hebrews" (*tōn hebreōn*) may refer to immigrants from Palestine, or members who either used Hebrew as their liturgical language or whose identity was defined by their use of Aramaic. Some funerary inscriptions, not all of them from Rome, contain the epithet *ebreus*, which is, however, even rarer than *iudaeus*.<sup>6</sup>

Epigraphs mentioning community offices, whether real or merely honorific, shed light on the social organization of Italian Jews. Some inscriptions preserve a detailed titulary, in Greek, of synagogue offices. Although the titles are sometimes similar to those found in traditional *collegia*, the actual functions of their bearers remain uncertain. They include *gerusiarchēs* and *archigerusiarchēs*, *archisynagōgos*, *archōn*, *grammateus*, *mellogrammateus*, *psalmōdos*, *patēr sunagōges*, *presbyteros*, *prostatēs*, *frontistēs*, *hypēretes*, and others. It is still debated whether the feminine form of some of these titles – *archēgissa*, *archisynagōgissa*, *mētēr synagōgēs*, *presbytera*, and

others – represents evidence of the participation of women in communal life, merely honorific designations expressing status, or hereditary titles (for example, in the case of the priestly titles *hierēia* and *hierissa*). All three possible meanings may have variously applied to Jewish women in Rome. While some epigraphs apply such titles even to children and youths, it would be imprudent to assume that the titles borne by women or children were merely honorific.<sup>7</sup>

No epigraphic attestation of the term "rabbi" for a Jewish leader in Rome has yet been discovered. Several inscriptions, however, do mention scholars who apparently exercised the typical functions of the spiritual leader of a community. *JIWE* II 68, an inscription dating from the third or fourth century, is the epitaph of a Eusebius *didaskalos*, "teacher," and *nomomathēs*, "student of the Law," a title also appearing in other texts (*JIWE* II 270, 374, and possibly 390). Another epigraph mentions a *nomodidaskalos*, "teacher of the Law" (*JIWE* II 307), while the designation *mathētēs sofōn*, "disciple of the wise men" (*JIWE* II 544), is probably a calque of the Hebrew *talmid hakhamim*. This evidence, along with other indications we can glean from the rabbinic tradition, sheds light on a statement by Jerome in 384; he reports that Roman Jews were wont to spend time studying, and recalls borrowing scrolls (*volumina*) of the Hebrew Bible from a *hebreus* who in his turn had borrowed them from a synagogue (Jerome, *Ep.* 32.1; 36.1). It is not unlikely, as some scholars have suggested, that this was the milieu in which the *Collatio Legum Mosaicarum et Romanarum* (*Comparison of Mosaic and Roman Laws*) was composed. Indeed, the *Collatio* is the only text of this period that has been ascribed to Roman Judaism.<sup>8</sup>

The extent of conversion to Judaism is still debated. While some scholars have represented it as a mass phenomenon, others have argued against this on various grounds, mostly owing to the lack of evidence.<sup>9</sup> Proselytes (*theosebeis* and *metuentes*) are indeed attested in several inscriptions, but they are usually women. This is possibly due to Hadrian's ban on circumcision, which made female conversion de facto more tolerable, although in 202 a decree of Septimius Severus, reiterated by Constantine in 329, universally prohibited conversion. A third- or fourth-century Latin epitaph to a Veturia Paulla, who had assumed the Jewish name of Sarah, is a remarkable example both of female proselytism and of a woman office-holder: "Veturia Paulla, placed in (her) eternal home, who lived 86 years, six

<sup>5</sup> Lacerenza, "Le iscrizioni giudaiche."

<sup>6</sup> Van der Horst, *Ancient Jewish Epitaphs*, 68–71; *JIWE* II.44; Williams, "The Meaning and Function of *Ioudaios*."

<sup>7</sup> Brooten, *Women Leaders*; Kraemer, "A New Inscription from Malta"; Zabin, "Iudaeae benemerenti."

<sup>8</sup> Cracco Ruggini, "Tolleranza e intolleranza"; Rabello, "La datazione della *Collatio*."

<sup>9</sup> Feldman, *Jew and Gentile*; Rutgers, "Attitudes to Judaism"; Paget, "Jewish Proselytism"; Rokeah, "Ancient Jewish Proselytism"; Feldman, "Conversion to Judaism."

months, (and) 16 years as a proselyte under the name of Sarah, 'mother of the synagogues' of Campus and Volumnius. May she sleep peacefully" (*JJWE* II 577). This case, however, does not reflect the usual trend of the time. At least as early as the third century, people recorded in inscriptions of the Italian diaspora show a tendency to adopt non-Jewish names, which in Late Antiquity eventually became more common than Jewish names. The preference was for local – that is, Latin – names. This trend has been interpreted as one of the many signs of interaction between Jewish and non-Jewish milieus in late antique Italy.<sup>10</sup>

In the epigraphic and archaeological documentation of the western diaspora, Jewish religious ideology expressed itself predominantly in a visual form – that is, in the iconographic repertory used especially in epitaphs and the decoration of hypogea and catacombs, as well as on a variety of everyday-use objects such as seals, lamps, and the Jewish gilt glass. The subjects do not seem to differ from those found in other places of the diaspora and in Palestine itself: the Temple/synagogue, the menorah, cases for sacred scrolls, and ritual objects for the festival of Succoth (*ethrog*, *lulav*, and *shofar*). Like the formulas of eulogy and hope in future life that appear in the inscriptions, these signs expressed here an eschatological and soteriological meaning.<sup>11</sup>

The infrequent use of the biblical text in Roman Jewish epitaphs is striking. Only three direct quotations are known. Drawing on the Greek versions of both Aquila and the Septuagint, all three are from Proverbs 10:7: "the memory of the just shall be for a blessing." The formula concluding many epigraphs, "may he/she sleep peacefully," was possibly inspired by the Septuagint version of Psalms 4:9. Such citations cast little light on the liturgical practices of Roman Jews. Originally a bilingual population speaking Aramaic and Greek, Jews settling in Rome had to learn Latin as well, which must have gradually become the primary instrument of everyday conversation. Nonetheless, up until the eve of Late Antiquity, catacomb inscriptions were mainly in Greek, which according to some scholars was, like Latin, regarded as a sacred script. Out of the whole corpus of known Roman Jewish inscriptions, 78 percent are in (usually unpolished) Greek, 21 percent in Latin, and only 1 percent in Hebrew or Aramaic.<sup>12</sup> Although several are bilingual, scholars regard the use of Hebrew, attested

<sup>10</sup> Rutgers, *Jews in Late Ancient Rome*, 170–5; idem, "Interactions and its Limits."

<sup>11</sup> Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, II, 3–69; Kraemer, "Jewish Tuna and Christian Fish"; Rutgers, "Death and Afterlife."

<sup>12</sup> Leon, "The Language of the Greek Inscriptions"; Solin, "Juden und Syrer," 701–11; van der Horst, *Ancient Jewish Epitaphs*, 25–34; Rutgers, *The Jews*, 176–91; Rosén, "The Language of the Jewish Diaspora of Rome."

in only thirteen cases and limited to stereotyped formulas such as *šalom*, *Yisra'el*, or *šalom 'al Yisra'el*, as having had a visual rather than a textual significance, reflecting the magical and sacred character traditionally attributed to Hebrew writing.<sup>13</sup>

### Ostia

Besides the catacombs – which shed light only on a relatively late period – the most conspicuous archaeological witness to Judaism in Rome and its surroundings is the synagogue of Ostia. This monumental building, discovered in 1961 outside the town walls, was probably founded around the middle of the first century and is hence the oldest synagogue of the western Mediterranean. It remained in use at least until the late fourth century, when it was still being renovated and expanded. The main room of the complex originally had three benches along three walls. The ark containing the Torah stood on a podium leaning against the back wall, which was half-curved and faced southeast. The most striking feature of the synagogue is an apsed and raised aedicule with two seven-armed candelabra gracing the corbels of its architraves. The aedicule, oriented in the opposite direction to the ancient *bimah* in the main hall, was only added in the fourth or possibly the fifth century, after the benches along the wall had been removed. The gradual evolution of religious ritual and ideology reflected in this reorientation of the room has only recently begun to draw the attention it deserves.<sup>14</sup> The synagogue contained various structures with social, religious, and ritual functions built at different times, including rooms for ablutions, a kitchen, and at least one meeting or study room.

The inscriptions found at Ostia and Porto (*JJWE* I 113–18), and the later building phases of the Ostia synagogue, both bear witness to a high degree of Romanization of the local Jewish community, which may have been divided into several distinct groups. The individuals mentioned in the surviving inscriptions (dating from the second and third centuries) include donors and community leaders and bear impressive-sounding names: Plotius Fortunatus (with his sons Ampliatus and Secundinus, and his wife Secunda), Ofilia Basilia, Caius Iulius Iustus, Livius Dionysius, Mindius Faustus, Marcus Aurelius Pylades (whose father, however, was called Iudas). A fourth-century inscription from Porto mentions a 'Ellel

<sup>13</sup> Noy, "Peace upon Israel"; Rutgers, "Death and Afterlife," 302–5; Bengtsson, "Semitic Inscriptions in Rome."

<sup>14</sup> Görtz-Wrisberg, "A Sabbath Service in Ostia."

(Hillel; *JJWE* I 17). The synagogue was abandoned and the community gradually dwindled away in the fifth century, when Ostia declined.

#### SOUTHERN ITALY

The inflow of Jewish slaves into Roman Italy, especially after the campaigns of Pompey, Vespasian, and Titus, boosted the Jewish population both of Rome and of the vast southern Italian region, for a long time the center of important, mainly agricultural, production. Ancient literary sources provide only generic information about this demographic increase, which is described more precisely in late antique and early medieval sources, such as the *Sefer Yosippon*. Various archaeological and especially epigraphic finds, however, mostly from Campania, Puglia, and Sicily, point to a sizeable Jewish presence in southern Italy in Roman times.

#### Campania

Campania has yielded the earliest evidence of a Jewish presence in Italy. This includes some dubious or fragmentary iconographic and epigraphic materials from Pompeii that have long been either misinterpreted or decidedly overrated. It is beyond doubt, and hardly surprising, that some Jews inhabited this mercantile town of the Campanian coast, which had an active river port and housed several foreign cults. In recent years, however, scholars have cast serious doubts on the reliability, or Jewishness, of these Pompeian testimonies (mostly graffiti with personal names). Thus, although there are clues pointing incontrovertibly to the presence of Jews in Pompeii, and more in the Vesuvian area generally, the actual evidence for this is neither as reliable nor as abundant as once believed.<sup>15</sup>

There is, on the other hand, unequivocal literary and epigraphic testimony establishing the area of Puteoli (present day Pozzuoli), the large Roman port northwest of Naples, as the residence of the most important Jewish community of ancient Campania. Long before Ostia came to the fore, Puteoli, a major grain port and the principal destination of men and merchandise from all over the Mediterranean basin, housed eastern cults and communities even as early as the republican age. Like its counterpart in Rome, the Jewish community of Puteoli may have initially been organized as mercantile unions or *collegia*, as in the case of the Tyrians, whose

community in Puteoli even predates the one in the capital. References in Philo and Josephus confirm the existence of a flourishing Jewish community in Puteoli by the first half of the first century CE. Philo mentions visiting Puteoli with other members of the Jewish *gerousia* of Alexandria, whence he had set sail in the winter of 38/39 or 39/40, possibly landing at the Campanian port, where he stayed for some time to meet Caligula (*Legat.* 185–6). While he does not provide specific information about the local Jewish community, Philo does mention the discussion that followed the report about Gaius's attempt to desecrate the temple of Jerusalem by introducing his statue into it. The Jews of Puteoli informed their Alexandrian guests of this event, about which Philo unfortunately provides no further information. In his autobiography, Josephus mentions journeying to Puteoli around the year 64 to ask Nero to free some priests imprisoned by procurator M. Antonius Felix. During his stay there, he recalls meeting the Jewish actor Aliturus, who introduced him to Poppaea Sabina. Josephus alludes here to her *theosebeia*, which several scholars interpret as sympathy for Judaism (*Life* 16).

Other information about the Jews of Puteoli dates from the late Herodian period, notably from years 4 and 35/36. The episode of the pseudo-Alexander is especially interesting. After succeeding in fooling the Jewish communities of Crete and Melos, this imitator of the homonymous son of Herod the Great did the same thing in Puteoli. He then moved to Rome where Augustus unmasked his imposture (*J.W.* 2.103–4; *Ant.* 17.328–9). Josephus's story provides several bits of information about the Puteolan Jewish elite, which evidently included high-ranking figures who entertained relations with Herod the Great, his sons, and the court. In another passage (*Ant.* 18.159–61) referring to the year 36 CE, Josephus mentions a loan granted to the future king Agrippa I by Alexander, the wealthy alabarch of Alexandria and brother of the philosopher Philo, enabling Agrippa to continue his journey to Campania and meet Tiberius on Capri. Both Philo and Josephus mention locations in the Phlegraean Fields in connection with other historical circumstances, but neither provides any further information about the local Jewish community. The *adelphoi* whom the apostle Paul stayed with in Puteoli sometime between 59 and 61 were presumably Jews (*Acts* 28:13–14).

Epigraphic evidence about Puteolan Jews, while surprisingly meager, is notable for its antiquity. Apart from a brief inscription in which the gerusiarch Ti. Claudius Philippus remembers the erection of a wall (*JJWE* I 23), the most significant record is the epitaph of a young woman called Claudia Aster, *Hierosolymitana*, who arrived from Judea as a slave in the

<sup>15</sup> Lacerenza, "Graffiti aramaici"; idem, "Per un riesame della presenza giudaica a Pompei"; idem, "La realtà documentaria."

last quarter of the first century. The inscription (*JWE* I 26), found in what was at the time a suburb of Puteoli bordering on the territory of Neapolis, is of exceptional importance; it shows that at least a portion of the slaves captured after the conquest of Jerusalem in 70 CE were brought to Campania (see Fig. 14).<sup>16</sup>

The city of Puteoli is also mentioned in some rabbinic sources referring to the age of Domitian. In the second century CE, the above-cited R. Mattiah ben Heresh is said to have spent time in Puteoli with some other scholars before establishing himself in Rome (*Sifra Deut.* 80). Information about the subsequent centuries is scarce. It is likely that at the time of the Vandal incursions, most of the Jewish population of Puteoli left the city to seek refuge in the nearby, better fortified city of Neapolis. The sinking of Puteoli under the geological effect known as bradyseism may have been an additional motivation.

In Neapolis, the origin of the local Jewish community was probably connected to the flourishing local colony of Alexandrians, whose presence in the city dates at least as far back as the early empire. The Alexandrians resided in the *Vicus Alexandrinorum* along the lower *decumanus*, in a neighborhood accordingly called *Regio Nilensis*. The Jews must also have lived in this area, more specifically near the stretch of the town walls looking out toward the sea, as indicated by several clues: notably, a passage in Procopius (*Bell. Goth.* 1.8.41, 10.24–6), and medieval sources mentioning a synagogue that seems to have been active for several centuries.

Sporadic finds within the ancient urban perimeter confirm the presence of Jews in Naples, but the most important evidence for this comes from inscriptions from an above-ground cemetery found in an area that was suburban at the time. Although the graves cannot be dated precisely, they belong to the period from the fourth to the sixth century (*JWE* I 27–35). While the inscriptions – which are all in Latin, except for one in Greek – draw on a formulaic repertory similar to that of coeval Christian epitaphs, they also include typical Hebrew expressions such as *shalom*, *shalom 'al m'nuhatekha*, *amen*, *sela*. In one case, the name of the deceased, Numerius, is transcribed in Jewish characters. Interestingly, three out of ten of the individuals mentioned in the epitaphs are qualified as “Jews,” including the above-mentioned Numerius, *ebreus*; a Criscentia, *ebrea*, daughter of Pascasus; a Flaes, *ebreus*.

It is also significant that all the deceased have Latin names, except for the *prostatēs* Benjamin “of Caesarea,” to whom the only Greek inscription

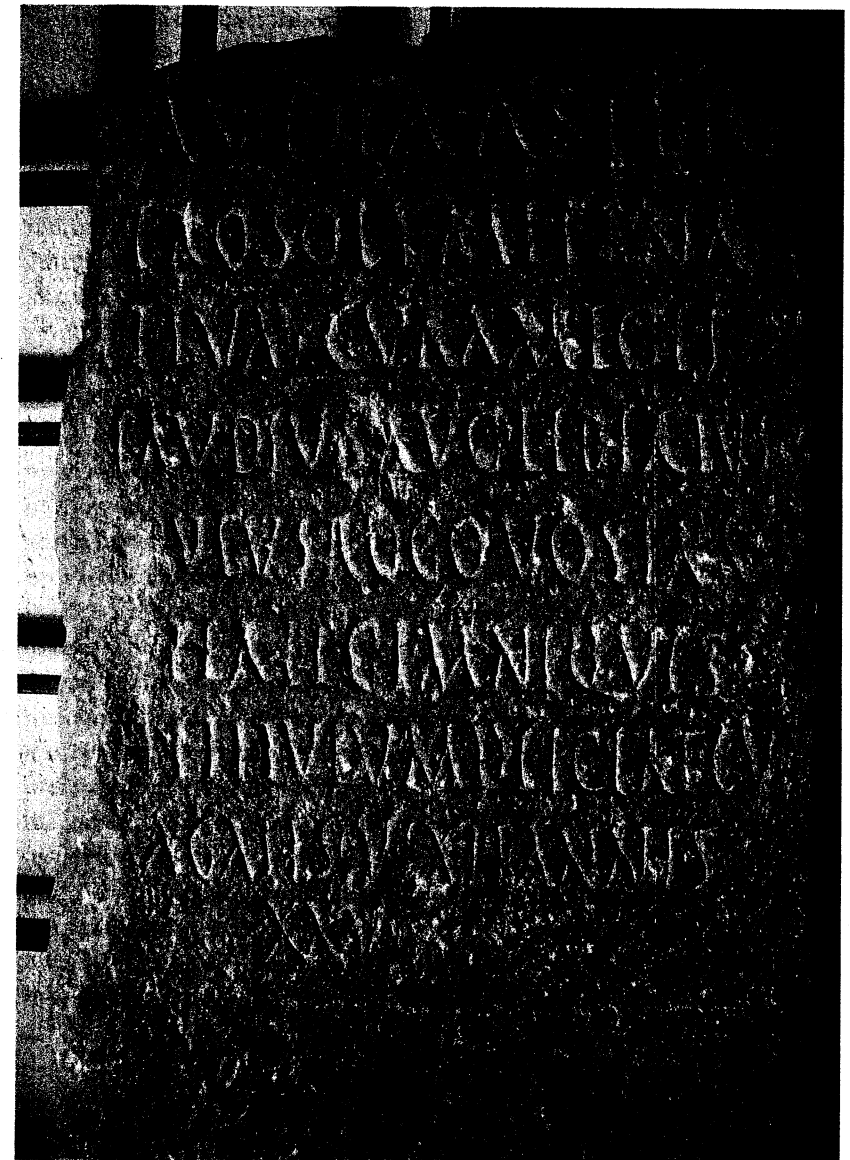


Fig. 14. Epitaph of Claudia Aster from Jerusalem. Puteoli, first century CE. Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale. Photograph courtesy of G. Lacerenza.

in the group belongs. The use of this language probably means that “Caesarea” refers here to the Palestinian city of the same name, where, according to some Talmudic sources (such as *y. Ber.* 3:1, 6a), the synagogal liturgy was celebrated in Greek. Still, Caesarea in Mauritania cannot

<sup>16</sup> Lacerenza, “L’iscrizione di Claudia Aster Hierosolymitana.”

be totally ruled out, considering that the inscriptions indicate, more or less explicitly, a North African origin for several of the deceased, notably [Gau?]diosus, *civis Mauritaniae*, and possibly Erena, a common name at Cyrene. Others were Italian, but not Neapolitan – namely, Barbarus from Venafrum, and Hereni and his father Thelesinus, from Rome. Thus, in spite of its paucity, this late documentation clearly points to a composite character of the Jewish community of Naples. A few epigraphs from other archaeological contexts in Naples probably belong to Neapolitan Jews. One mentions the title “rabbi” (*rebbi*, in the genitive *rebbitis*); because of the contexts in which they appear, some scholars regard this as an honorific title or a sign of social distinction rather than an indication of actual religious leadership.

The introduction of the laws of the Theodosian Code in 438, which drastically curtailed the Jews’ social status, had various effects on conversion in the western Mediterranean. The presbyter Uranius’s mention, around the mid-fifth century, of the presence of a great number of *neophyti* at the funerary cortege of the bishop of Naples, John I, is plausible in this new juridical and social climate. However, the Ostrogoth Theodoric’s later takeover of Campania (494–526) marked a reversal of this anti-Jewish trend. Procopius of Caesarea describes the Neapolitan Jewish community on the eve of Byzantine conquest (536) as flourishing, influential, and economically important. Several fourth- and fifth-century documents bear witness to the presence of Jews in various areas of Campania, such as Capua and Abellinum, and especially in the Nocera-Sarno plain, which has yielded several marble epitaphs, all in Greek. One (*JIWE* I 22, from Brusciiano) mentions a *rebbi* Abba Mari, probably of Palestinian origin. Two others found near the ancient town of Nuceria Alfaterna commemorate, respectively, the scribe (*grammateus*) Pedonius and his wife Myrina, *presbytera*.

#### Venosa

Of all the southern Italian sites that hosted Jewish communities, Venosa (ancient Venusia, in Basilicata) is especially remarkable for its celebrated Jewish catacombs. Discovered in 1853, they yielded an extraordinary epigraphic documentation (*JIWE* I 42–112). The main cemetery stood next to the Christian catacombs in an area outside the town. It consisted of several superimposed tunnels, only a small part of which has been actually explored. More than seventy epigraphs were found here, mostly painted on the plaster used to seal the tombs. The only one bearing a date is from the year 521. The others seem to date from the third or fourth century onward.

Apparently, Venosa was one of the towns in southern Italy with a high concentration of Jewish inhabitants. The inscriptions from the catacomb indicate that Jews were well integrated into local society. Many of them even enjoyed high status, as various references to public offices demonstrate. The influence of Judaism on local society is confirmed by the presence of several proselytes – or at least “God-fearers” – in another cemetery, the so-called Lauridia hypogeum (*JIWE* I 113–16). The titulary attested at Venosa is the same as in Rome. The community included presbyters, gerusiarchs, archisynagogoi, and *patres synagogae*. A bilingual Greek-Hebrew epitaph (*JIWE* I 48) mentions a teacher called Jacob (*Iakob didaskalos*). Several scholars have identified the *duo apostuli et duo rebbites* (“two apostles and two rabbis”) mentioned in the famous epitaph of Faustina (*JIWE* I 86) as envoys of the Jewish Patriarchate to Gothic-Byzantine Italy. The text, probably dating from the mid-sixth century, is clearly later than the suppression of the Patriarchate in 425. It thus probably refers to religious representatives of the local community, whose titulary indeed resembled those used in Jewish communities in Palestine.<sup>17</sup>

The Venosa inscriptions bear witness to strong ties with other Jewish communities, both in southern Italy and throughout the Mediterranean. They also provide clear evidence of a gradual rediscovery of Hebrew in religious contexts and in the liturgical practices of the western diaspora. The earlier inscriptions are all in Greek, after which there is a gradual shift to Latin. Hebrew, which initially makes its appearance in the usual stereotypical formulas, later becomes increasingly common, as the epigraph of the old presbyter Secundinus, written in Hebrew and Greek in Hebrew characters, demonstrates (*JIWE* I 75) (Fig. 15). Indeed, Hebrew is, in percentage, more frequent at Venosa than in Rome: out of seventy-one epigraphs, twenty-nine (or 41 percent) contain Hebrew expressions supplementing the Greek or Latin text, and nine (or 13 percent) are entirely in Hebrew.

#### Puglia and Calabria

According to an opinion commonly held among medieval Jewish scholars of southern Italy, the Jewish communities of Puglia were the first to establish themselves on Italian soil; they consisted mainly of captives whom Titus brought to Italy after destroying Jerusalem, five thousand of whom were settled in the Salento peninsula, between Taranto and Otranto. It is indeed very likely that a Jewish community existed at Brundisium

<sup>17</sup> Lacerenza, “Ebraiche liturgie e peregrini *apostuli*.”



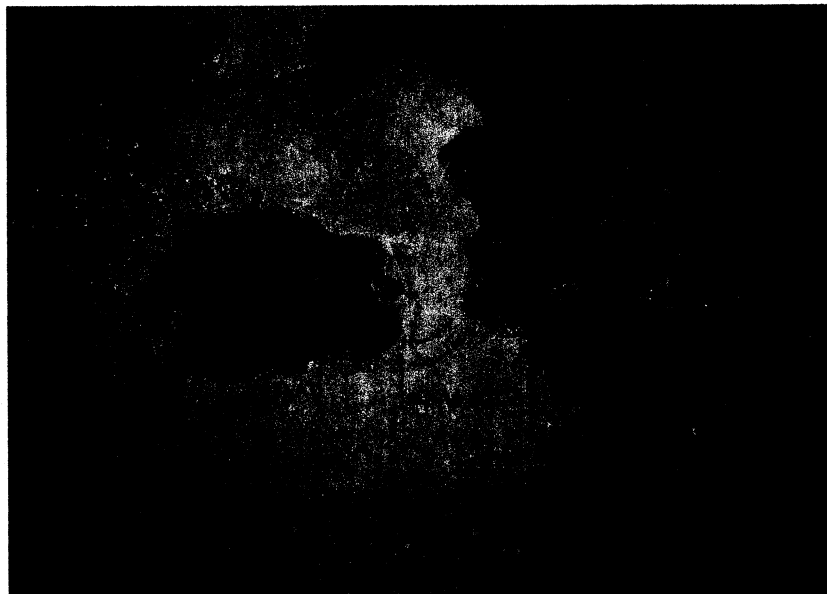


Fig. 15. Venosa, Jewish catacombs. Epitaph of the presbyter Secundinus, Greek in Hebrew letters, fifth/sixth century CE. Photograph courtesy of G. Lacerenza.

(present-day Brindisi), an important port of trade with the East and reportedly a destination for ships from Judea. There is no certainly dated evidence, however, of the presence of Jews in Puglia before 398, when the emperor Honorius issued a decree requiring the Jews of many towns of *Apulia Calabriamque* (at the time, the toponym *Calabria* designated the Salento peninsula) to fill the office of decurion. This obligation had been abolished by Constantine but reintroduced by Valentinian II in 383 (*CTH* 12.1.158). Thus, as had already been the case long before under Septimius Severus, the Jews were now required to participate in town *curiae* and assume all the associated duties, both religious and economic.

Honorius's decree indicates that in Puglia there must have been towns where the majority, if not the entirety, of the population was Jewish. It also attests the presence of Jews among the *maiores* of several towns of late antique southern Italy; epigraphic evidence, especially from Venosa, establishes the same point. However, archaeological and epigraphic sources from present-day Puglia and Calabria do not reflect the importance of the Jewish population. Otranto (ancient Hydruntum), at the tip of Salento, has yielded a single epitaph, dated to the third century and containing the Hebrew expression *mishkavam 'im tzaddiqim*, "may they rest with the just"

(*JIWE* I 134). At Lupiae (present-day Lecce), the presence of Jews is indirectly attested by the above-mentioned epitaph from Venosa dated to 521; it remembers the deceased Augusta's father and her grandfather Simon, who was from Lecce: *nepus Symonatis p(atris) Lypiensium* (*JIWE* I 107). At Taranto, the necropolis of Montedoro apparently housed both Christian and Jewish graveyards. Two inscriptions found here, datable between the fifth and sixth centuries, include typically Jewish names: 'Azariah, Daudatos (Natan'el), Elias, Iaakov, and Susannah. The Hebrew text on the verso of the epitaph of Daudatos son of 'Azariah (*JIWE* I 118) is one of the earliest and longest-known epigraphs of this kind, containing several eulogies, including the characteristic "may his soul be bound up in the bundle of life" (from 1 Samuel 25:29).

The most significant evidence of a Jewish presence in Calabria (ancient *Bruttium*), the remains of a synagogue erected around the middle of the fourth century, was discovered at Bova Marina, near *Skyle* on the Peutinger Table. Nothing but the foundations, and fragments of the mosaic decoration of some of the rooms, survive. The symbol of the menorah, oriented southeast toward Jerusalem, is still visible in the prayer hall. Although the local Jewish community probably used an adjacent funerary area where several different forms of inhumation are attested, it has yielded no grave goods and shows no distinctively Jewish features. The remains of several glass lamps, however, have been found in the synagogue, which remained in use until the seventh century. Also discovered were sherds of locally produced amphorae bearing stamped images of the menorah on the handles, probably to certify the *kashruth* of the contents. The discovery of these amphorae in Rome is evidence of the exportation of local products to other Jewish communities in the Italian peninsula.<sup>18</sup>

#### *Sicily and Malta*

Although the settlement of Jews in Sicily probably began at an early date, no documents earlier than the imperial period have thus far come down to us. As with almost everywhere else in Italy, the most abundant materials date from late antique times. The earliest testimony, dating from the third or fourth century, actually originates in the catacombs of Villa Torlonia in Rome. This is the epitaph of a Justus, also mentioning his father Amachius from Catania (*JIWE* II 515). Most of the evidence has been found in eastern Sicily, and the island's most important Jewish communities were

<sup>18</sup> Arthur, "Some Observations"; Zevi, "Recenti studi e scoperte di archeologia ebraica."

apparently those of Syracuse and Catania. The earliest attestation of a Jewish presence in that area is a reference to Catanian *iudaei* in the *Passio Sanctae Agathae*. Referring to the third century, but actually written at a much later date, it is an unreliable witness. The only surviving epigraphic sources are a few inscriptions no earlier than the fourth or fifth century. An especially interesting epitaph of a certain Aurelius Samohil, precisely dated to 383, reveals Christian influences and possibly a nonconventional use of the calendar (*JIWE* I 145).<sup>19</sup> The Jews who settled in that area made ample use of catacombs and rock cemeteries. Many traces of this custom remain, especially at Syracuse and Noto, but all are badly preserved. In the interior, in the south-central part of the island, two epigraphs found at Filosofiana, on the ancient road from Catania to Agrigento, document the presence of a small Jewish settlement. There may be a connection between this settlement and evidence of a local glass-manufacturing industry.

Witnesses to Judaism found in Sicily (not just epigraphs, but also seals, rings, and lamps) include a number of sources that are magical in character, such as inscriptions and amulets. Some are actually Jewish, while others are Greco-Roman or Christian, with Jewish influence. These finds are far more numerous in Sicily than in the rest of Italy, where they only occur sporadically. More abundant parallels from the eastern Mediterranean suggest that they spread from there to Sicily. The dissemination of these artifacts goes hand in hand with the spread and distinctive characteristics of Jewish communities on the island. The most common amulets, laminas or small metal plates, are of mixed provenance, form, material, content, and function. Some are inscribed in Hebrew and/or Aramaic, others – the most numerous – in Greek; still others bear pseudo-Hebrew inscriptions or magical *charaktères* or symbols. The Comiso area has yielded some rock-carved Greek inscriptions, generally datable between the fourth and sixth centuries. Here Christian formulas and Jewish names are combined with a wealth of symbols and pseudo-characters to ensure magical protection of agricultural land and assets. Such inscriptions are not isolated occurrences in late antique Sicily; other examples are attested at Akrai (Palazzolo Acreide), Noto, and Modica, all featuring, more or less prominently, elements of Jewish-influenced magic and angelology.

In the fourth and fifth centuries, on the island of Malta, which in Roman times was administratively connected to Sicily, a number of Jews

were buried inside a Christian cemetery, the so-called catacombs of St. Paul and St. Agatha. The inscriptions scratched in the stucco that sealed the loculi, all in Greek and accompanied by the menorah, confirm the existence of an organized community on the island (*JIWE* I 163–8).

#### SARDINIA AND NORTHERN ITALY

##### *Sardinia*

Other than Josephus's unreliable report about the expulsion of the descendants of freedman devotees of foreign cults from Rome to Sardinia in 19 CE, there are no historical or literary sources about a Jewish presence on the island before the testimony of Gregorius Magnus (540–604). So far, the meager archaeological evidence sheds light, although a dim one, only on a rather late period.

Two Jewish hypogeal cemeteries – which, as in Venosa, adjoined Christian cemeteries – have been identified on the island of Sant'Antioco, at the southeast extremity of Sardinia. One, called “of Beronice,” is very small, consisting of a single sepulchral chamber with graves cut into the walls and floor, possibly used by a single family group in the fourth or fifth century. The most significant inscription (*JIWE* I 170), concerning a young woman called Beronice, is painted in red at the back of one of the main arcosolia. It is composed in Latin with some Hebrew formulas also found on the adjacent, unfortunately poorly preserved arcosolium. Nearby is the second hypogeum, which is also not very large. At the time of its discovery in 1920, it still contained an intact burial. The inscription painted on the plaster was difficult to read and was soon lost. It was composed in Latin with some conventional Hebrew expressions, uncharacteristically written from left to right, with some letters reversed or miswritten. The writer was obviously mechanically reproducing a script with which he or she was barely acquainted (*JIWE* I 173). Porto Torres (ancient *Turrus Libisonis*), on the north versant of the island, has yielded several Jewish lamps datable to the fifth century, as well as the Latin epitaphs of two children, *Gaudiosa* and *Anianus*, probably from the same period (*JIWE* I 175–6). Of the few other Jewish artifacts found on the island, which include some rings and seals, several appear to be even later.

As is also the case in other areas, the Sardinian evidence parallels coeval Christian materials. The Jewish character of the epigraphs is more often indicated by the addition of figurative elements or eulogies in the

<sup>19</sup> Wasserstein, “Calendaric Implications”; Millar, “The Jews of the Graeco-Roman Diaspora”; Stern, *Calendar and Community*, 132–6.

Hebrew script rather than by distinctive features of the text itself or of the name of the deceased.

### Northern Italy

To date, there are no traces of the penetration of Judaism into northern Italy earlier than the fourth century, when evidence of Jewish presence first appears in some of the most advanced urban centers, such as Mediolanum (Milan), Brixia (Brescia), Bononia (Bologna), Ravenna, and Aquileia. There is also some evidence from rural areas, but these – unlike the southern Italian countryside – have mostly yielded scarce archaeological and epigraphic materials. In northern Italy, relations between Jews and Christians were apparently unstable and insecure, not favorable to the flourishing of local Jewish culture. The few inscriptions from Mediolanum (*JIWE* I 1–3) do not contain significant information. The famous bishop of Milan, Ambrose, staunchly anti-Jewish, attended the unearthing of the remains of the Christian martyrs Vitalis and Agricola in the Jewish cemetery of Bologna, where they had allegedly been buried around 304 (Ambrose, *Exhort.* 8).

Byzantine Ravenna has yielded more abundant evidence, including a fifth- or sixth-century amphora sherd bearing the inscription *shalom* in Jewish characters (*JIWE* I 10). In this city there were Jewish bureaucrats, slave traders, craftsmen, *militēs classiarii* (marines), and shipowners supplying the imperial fleet. As elsewhere in Italy, in late antique times increasing limitations were imposed on Jews, and episodes of intolerance are recorded. A local law issued in 415 addressed the issue of Jewish owners of Christian slaves. It explicitly mentioned the *didascalus* Annas, evidently the religious leader of the community, and the *maiores iudaeorum*. A decree of the following year dealt with the case of Jews who had converted to Christianity in order to benefit, for example, from asylum rights on church grounds. The Ostrogoth Theodoric allegedly buried Odoacer, the first barbarian king of Italy, near a synagogue of Ravenna in 493 (Ioh. Ant. frag. 214a [*FHG* IV.621]). Aquileia, at the northeastern extremity of the Italian coast, yielded a late Republican inscription (*JIWE* I 7) of a L. Aiadius Dama, *iudaeus portor*. The term *portor* has been interpreted as meaning “boatman,” or else as an abbreviation of *portitor*, “customs officer.” This inscription is the only testimony so far from this early period, although various later sources mention the presence of a rather important Jewish community at Aquileia. While this tradition once led scholars to identify various archaeological finds

and epigraphs from Aquileia as Jewish, the Jewishness of almost all this material is now rejected.

### GAUL AND SPAIN

Until the fifth century, the literary, archaeological, and epigraphic sources attesting a Jewish presence in Gaul are too sporadic to provide even a sketchy picture. The earliest evidence comes from Avignon, and includes some lamps graced with the menorah and a fourth-century seal bearing the name Ianu(arius). Another seal with the name Aster, from Bordeaux, is only slightly later. This area, too, has yielded lamps with Jewish symbols (*JIWE* I 190–2).

The Spanish evidence is more abundant and earlier, although the precise chronology of the finds is often debated. A first-century amphora from Ibiza bearing a Jewish stamp attests to early relations between the *emporia* of the Balearic Islands and Judea (*JIWE* I 178). The epitaph of the freedman A. Lucius (?) Roscius *iudaeus*, from Villamesías (*JIWE* I 188), may date from the first century, but its reading is uncertain. Other epigraphic materials dated by some scholars to the Roman imperial period are in all likelihood medieval instead. The most western evidence is a quartz intaglio with menorah and other symbols found in Ammaia (Lusitania, presently in Portugal; third century).

Thanks to the discovery of funerary inscriptions in various coastal towns, the evidence from the Iberian Peninsula becomes more substantial from the third or fourth century onward. Notably, an organized Jewish community is attested at Ilici (Elche), in southeast Spain, where the remains of a synagogue were found. Its mosaic floor still carried partially preserved Greek dedications referring to the synagogue as “prayer house,” and mentioning archons and presbyters. Mention of a merchant or traveler in one text is evidence that local Jews were involved in trading activities (*JIWE* I 182). The participation of Jews in the social life of late imperial Spain is documented by resolutions of the Elvira Council (305/306) seeking a rigid separation between the Jewish and Christian communities, and notably strictly forbidding mixed marriages. The forced conversion of about 540 Jews of the town of Mago (Mahón) on the island of Minorca, recounted in a celebrated epistle by the bishop Severus, is a clear indication of a decline in the living conditions of the Jews.<sup>20</sup> The same source provides valuable insight into the organization of the local Jewish community, which had a

<sup>20</sup> Severus Minoricensis, *Epistola ad omnem Ecclesiam de virtutibus ad Iudaeorum conversionem*.

synagogue (later transformed into a church) with rich furnishings and *libri sancti*. Its most eminent member, named Theodorus, held the office of *doctor legis*, an indubitably "rabbinic" role which the Jews, Severus tells us, called *pater patrum*, a title also attested in several southern Italian inscriptions (notably *JIWE* I 68, 85, 90, 114, all from Venosa).

The most original epigraphic testimonies, however, are all rather late. Dating from the Visigoth period, they come from the northeast coast of the Iberian Peninsula. Several sites have yielded bilingual or trilingual epitaphs of the fifth or sixth century featuring Latin side by side not only with Greek – as in various Christian epitaphs from the same area – but also with Hebrew: an eloquent witness to the eastern origins of at least part of the local population. The best known of these epitaphs is the so-called Tortosa trilingual inscription from southern Cataluna. This epitaph of a girl, Meliosa, daughter of Rabbi Yehudah and *domina (kura)* Maria, is notable for its nonbanal use of Hebrew (*JIWE* I 183). An echo of synagogal liturgy appears in a bilingual Latin-Hebrew inscription, apparently not funerary, from Tarragona (*JIWE* I 185). Its Hebrew text contains the expression *shalom 'al Yisra'el we-'alenu we-'al b'nenu, amen* ("peace on Israel, and on ourselves and our children. Amen"). The mention of scholars (*didascali*) in another epitaph from the same town (*JIWE* I 186) indicates that at least some of the members of this community enjoyed a high social status and cultural standard, and maintained active religious contacts with Palestine.

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