

# *LATINO-ROMANIOTES: THE CONTINUITY OF JEWISH COMMUNITIES IN THE WESTERN DIASPORA, 400–700 CE*

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**ABSTRACT:** The fate of Jewish communities in the western Diaspora in the period between the collapse of the Roman Empire in the fifth century and the efflorescence of Jewish learning and culture in ninth-century Spain and tenth-century France and Germany has been neglected by both Jewish and generalist historians. It has been assumed that late antique communities outside ancient centres like the city of Rome and the south of Italy were relatively recent and the period saw a contraction and withdrawal of Jewish communities to the Mediterranean littoral until they were revitalised by Jews from the Islamic south and east. More recently it has been suggested that western Jews were cut off from Hebrew language and *Halakhah* and therefore developed as purely ‘biblical’ Jews, an easy prey to Christian proselytism. However, the late antique and early medieval periods have recently been reassessed and are now seen as a period of continuity. There is evidence that Jewish communities were more extensive and longer established than previously assumed, and that Jews in the west continued to maintain a vital contact with the east and had access to Hebrew learning, Hebrew scrolls and oral tradition. The identification of a previously unknown Latin Jewish manuscript (the Letter of Annas to Seneca) and the discovery of Jewish settlements in Roman Gaul suggest that evidence from this period has been neglected or overlooked and that the period needs reassessment as a period that provided the demographic and cultural continuity that the later medieval community built upon; an indigenous Latin-speaking ‘Romaniote’ community that underlay the later communities of Sepharad, Tzarfat and Ashkenaz.

## 1. SYNESIUS AND AMARANTUS

At the turn of the fifth century Synesius of Cyrene composed a letter to his brother,<sup>1</sup> a tragicomic tale of a shipwreck he had had the misfortune to experience while travelling homewards to Cyrenaica from the city of Alexandria. Synesius, a philosopher who wrote an elegant Attic Greek but composed his hymns to the ‘One God, Creator of all’ in good Doric, was a devoted friend of the celebrated female philosopher Hypatia of Alexandria with whom he had studied. He had travelled to Constantinople as a representative of his home province of Cyrenaica to the court of the young emperor Arcadius who in 395 had become sole ruler of the eastern half of the Roman Empire (now definitively and permanently divided between Latin West and Greek East). Returning to his estate in Cyrene, he looked forward to a quiet life of ‘books and hunting’, but was called like a true Roman gentleman to serve his city. However, in the late empire the only non-military institution that held any power locally was the church and Synesius’ fellow-citizens accordingly elected him to the

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<sup>1</sup> Epistle 5 in *Opere di Sinesio di Cirene*, edited by A. Garzya in 1989, 74–90. (All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.)

bishopric of Ptolemaïs. Despite his Christian wife, Synesius had many doctrinal and philosophical qualms about accepting the bishopric and only a sense of duty, along with generous concessions to his philosophical positions (and an agreement that allowed him to keep his wife and not put her away as other more properly ascetic bishops were forced to do) convinced him to accept. He spent the rest of his life as Kingsley's 'squire bishop'<sup>2</sup> defending his case against marauding, local tribesmen and incompetent, rapacious governors, and composing hymns in the same elegant Greek, but now with convenient references to the 'Son' as a concession to the faith of his flock. The date of his death is unknown but it is assumed that he died before 415 because his works show no awareness of the dreadful death of Hypatia in that year, viciously torn apart and burnt by a Christian mob.<sup>3</sup>

Synesius, standing as he does between the old world of Hellenic Neoplatonism and Roman civic order on the one hand, and the new Christian world on the other, between Augustine's two *civitates*, seems to personify the late Roman Empire itself as it transformed from pagan Antiquity to the Christian Middle Ages and as such Synesius has been the subject of fascinated study.<sup>4</sup> The captain and crew of Synesius' vessel, however, have received less note.

The boat in which Synesius had taken ship was only a small one with twelve hands and the captain and half the crew were Jews. Synesius expresses the usual Helleno-Roman prejudice of Jews as haters of Greeks; 'a graceless race and fully convinced of the piety of sending to Hades as many Greeks as possible'.<sup>5</sup> The captain, Amarantus, was heavily in debt and had sold all the spare gear, leaving only the one sail and a single anchor, and the crew were apparently all crippled in one way or another. Nevertheless he carried fifty passengers, including some Arab soldiers and about a dozen women; part of the deck was screened off with an old sail for their accommodation. Having left Alexandria, Amarantus tacked far out to seaward beyond sight of land much to Synesius' consternation who complained to the captain. The disgruntled Amarantus seems to have tried to explain basic navigation to Synesius but with little success. In the afternoon a gale blew up from the North and Amarantus tacked back towards land, much to the travellers' relief:

Now it so happened that this was the day on which the Jews make what they term the 'Preparation' [*paraskewē*], and they reckon the night, together with the day following this, as a time during which it is not lawful to work with one's hands. They keep this day holy and apart from the others, and they pass it in rest from labour of all kinds. Our captain accordingly let go the rudder from his hands the moment he guessed that the sun's rays had left the earth, and throwing himself prostrate, 'Allowed to trample upon him what sailor so desired'.<sup>6</sup>

Synesius and the other travellers, seemingly not understanding Amarantus' action, believed he had given up in despair and implored him not to give up:

<sup>2</sup> See the novel by Charles Kingsley, *Hypatia* (London: 1853).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book VI, Chapter 15.

<sup>4</sup> J. Bregman, *Synesius of Cyrene* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); C. Lacombrade, *Synesios de Cyrène: Hellène et chrétien* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1951); H.-I. Marrou, "Synesius of Cyrene and Alexandrian Neoplatonism" in A. Momigliano, ed., *The Conflict of Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 126–50; A. Cameron, J. Long, and L. Sherry, *Barbarians and Politics at the Court of Arcadius* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> *Opere de Sinesio*, Epistle 5, lines 19–21, 74.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 74–80, 78.

... for if our skipper proved at such a moment to be an orthodox observer [*nomodidaskalos*] of the Mosaic law what was life worth in the future? Indeed we soon understood why he had abandoned the helm, for when we begged him to do his best to save the ship, he stolidly continued reading his roll [*biblion*]. Despairing of persuasion, we finally attempted force, and one staunch soldier - for many Arabs of the cavalry were of our company - one staunch soldier, I say, drew his sword and threatened to behead the fellow on the spot if he did not resume control of the vessel. But the Maccabaeans in very deed was determined to persist in his observances. However, in the middle of the night he voluntarily returned to the helm. "For now," he said, "We are clearly in danger of death, and the law commands."<sup>7</sup>

In the morning they put in on a desert shore and, after waiting two days for the storm to abate, put out to sea again, only to be becalmed two days later. They then ran into another storm that broke the mast, and ran aground in a desolate spot, whence a local piloted them to a sheltered but almost equally deserted harbour. From this point we hear nothing more of Amarantus and his crew.

What sort of Jews were these? Synesius' account raises as many questions as it answers. From Amarantus' name and the Greek nicknames of his crew, and from the easy conversation with the travellers they are evidently Hellenized Jews, probably residents of Alexandria.<sup>8</sup> Clearly the ship set sail on the Friday and Amarantus would have known that he would be sailing on the Sabbath and yet he is evidently a pious Jew, dropping all work with the coming of the Sabbath. No doubt he had calculated on an easy passage that would not be beyond the capacities of the non-Jewish crew members, but interestingly Amarantus' Sabbath observation is not rigorously strict, it is tempered by an idea that can only be 'rabbinic', the principle of *piqquah nefes*,<sup>9</sup> that the Sabbath may be broken if there is even a doubt of danger to life. We can be sure that this had been voiced by Amarantus himself for it would be extremely unlikely that Synesius would be *au fait* with rabbinic reasoning, and (unfamiliar with the Scriptures as he might have been<sup>10</sup>) would have been more likely to reinforce his low opinion of the Jew and, ascribing the Gospel implacability of the Pharisees against breaking the Sabbath,<sup>11</sup> condemn Amarantus' piety with a self-serving breaking of the Sabbath. But what was the nature of the roll that Amarantus was reading? And in what language was it written? Was the Hellenized Amarantus reading Hebrew or Greek? It is suggestive that Synesius does not say what Amarantus was reading. Is this because he himself could not read it? What was the meaning of his prostration? Was this in prayer or simply reclining to read? Whichever it was, it evidently was not standing for the *Amida* prayer. Or maybe Synesius has simply not observed this. The whole scene is fraught with so many questions and yet Amarantus' is the last (relatively) clear portrait we get of a Jew in the Western Diaspora for almost half a millennium. What became of the Jews like Amarantus in this time? Is there any connection and continuity between Amarantus in the fifth century and Rashi in the eleventh century?

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 91–103, 80.

<sup>8</sup> Synesius does refer to Amarantus as 'Syrian', but this is probably no more than a reference to his ultimately non-Greek ethnic origin. Judging from Synesius' description of the ship and crew, it is unlikely that Amarantus could have sailed all the way from the port of Antioch.

<sup>9</sup> *Mekhilla Exodus* 31:12; *Babylonian Talmud Yom.* 85b.

<sup>10</sup> In his homilies Synesius quotes the Septuagint perfectly, whereas he frequently misquotes Plato. He doubtless had to check the former but thought himself an expert with the latter.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *Mk.* 3:6; *Mt.* 12:14; *Lk.* 6:11.

## 2. JEWS IN THE ‘DARK AGES’; A RADICALLY SPLIT DIASPORA?

The period between the ‘fall of Rome’ and the later Middle Ages was once characterised as the ‘Dark Ages’, a period of cultural decline and societal collapse with a lack of contemporary written history, demographic decline, limited building activity and material cultural achievements in general. Nevertheless this half millennium saw classical, pagan Rome centred on the Mediterranean replaced by medieval Catholic Europe centred on the North-West and opposed to a hostile and alien ‘East’ – whether it be the East of Orthodox Byzantium or the Islamic East (that rather curiously lay mainly to the South in Spain and Africa). The image of invading hordes of barbarians, pillaging their way across Europe, driving out the native population, destroying the glories of Antiquity remains a potent one. Indeed the name of one German tribe, the Vandals, has become synonymous with such wholesale destruction. However in the last couple of decades there has been a radical re-evaluation of Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages and the fifth to tenth centuries are now recognised not only as a transitional period in European history but one of continuity.<sup>12</sup> More sophisticated scientific research in archaeology and population genetics have contributed to a new understanding of the period. It has been recognised that ancient cities like Rome did not necessarily decline and others, like the frontier towns of Cologne and Regensburg, continued to be occupied and local trades and crafts flourished, albeit on a smaller and more local scale.<sup>13</sup>

The fifth to tenth centuries were also a crucial period in Jewish history for this is the period that saw the establishment of Rabbinic Judaism. But this receives scant, if any, attention in the generalist histories of the period. Roger Collins, for example, in his *Early Medieval Europe* indexes ‘Jews’ only three times; once in an aside to a comment on Christian ideas of truth, the other two references being to Jewish ‘complicity’ in the Arab invasions of Palestine and Spain respectively. Histories that have taken the later, predominantly urban and mercantile, medieval Jewish communities as paradigmatic and that have assumed that most Jewish communities outside the longer established communities in Rome and South Italy were newcomers have naturally concluded that the few Jews who were in the West in the late Roman Empire retreated to the more urban south in the face of the barbarian inroads until, reinvigorated and augmented by immigrants from the south and east, they once more began to colonise western Europe in the ninth and tenth centuries.<sup>14</sup>

With the ninth century we do in fact see an amazing efflorescence of Jewish culture in Europe. In Spain there is the ‘Golden Age’ of Jewish learning largely initiated by Chisdai ibn Shaprut (882–942), councillor to Caliph Abd ar-Raḥman III. In Germany Gershom ben Yehuda (c. 960–1040?) “the light of the exile” whom Rashi credited with being the teacher

<sup>12</sup> For the new revisionist history of the Early Middle Ages see R. Collins, *Early Medieval Europe 300–1000* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992); C. Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); T. Noble, ed., *From Roman Provinces to Medieval Kingdoms* (London: Routledge, 2006); G. Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West 376–568* (Cambridge: Cambridge Medieval Textbooks, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> For the continuity of urban life see B. Hårdh and L. Larsson, eds., *Central Places in the Migration and Merovingian Periods* (Lund: Department of Archaeology and Ancient History, 2002).

<sup>14</sup> A notable exception to the neglect of Jewish history in the period is the excellent collection of papers in the two volumes of *Gli Ebrei nell’Alto Medioevo* (1980) – an exception that somewhat proves the rule. However even this collection deals in the main with the better known communities of Italy and the wider Mediterranean region and hardly touches on the provinces of Spain, Gaul and the Germanies.

of all Ashkenaz, established his *yeshiva* in Mainz. In Italy the “*Chronicle of Ahimaaz*” testifies to the work of liturgical poets and *halakhists* in the ninth century. And in the South of France the letters of Bishop Agobard of Lyons (779–840) reveal that the Jews there had knowledge of *heikhalot* mystical works such as the *Otiot de R. Aqivah* (‘Alphabet of R. Akivah’) and the *Ši`ur Qomah* (‘Divine Dimensions’). This period also sees the beginning of a dramatic demographic shift in the world Jewish population. Within a few centuries Europe, particularly Spain and Germany will have surpassed the long-established centres in the Middle East, both intellectually and demographically. Is it really possible to explain this all by the movement into Europe of a surely limited number of merchants? Could Jews have emigrated to the (particularly inhospitable) Christian north in sufficient numbers to account for all this?

The assumption of decline also underlies the work of Jewish historians. Graetz could not be plainer; in his brief chapter on the Jews in Europe in the early Middle Ages he states that ‘The Jews in Europe had no history in the proper sense of the word . . . there are only chronicles of martyrdom at the hands of the victorious Church monotonously repeated but with little variation in all countries.’<sup>15</sup> Salo Wittmayer Baron writing nearly a century later is equally dismal in his assessment of the period;

Withdrawing behind the rampart of talmudic law and religion, the Jewish people of the sixth century continued to pursue its historic career quietly, almost inarticulately. After the brilliant light – and shadows – emerging from the talmudic letters in both Palestine and Babylon, Jewish life was now suddenly enveloped in a deep mist. . . .When the downfall finally came, the Jews recoiled to await in their sheltered corner those better times which, they still confidently hoped, were soon to come.<sup>16</sup>

Cecil Roth in the introduction to the eleventh volume of the projected *World History of the Jewish People* acknowledged the problems in arguing *e silentio* on the extent and character of the Jewish population of Europe prior to the ninth century and concedes that the example of Rashi, ‘or even of Rabbenu Gershom of Mainz two generations before him, seem to suggest a lengthy intellectual genealogy in this same environment [Dark Age Europe] – but we have only slender evidence for its existence.’<sup>17</sup> More recently still, Robert Chazan introducing his study of medieval Jewry in the eleventh to fifteenth centuries describes ‘the small Jewish settlements in western Christendom, huddled along the northern shores of the Mediterranean Sea, in Italy, southern France, and northern Spain; [a putative observer] might not even bothered to mention them, for they would hardly seem worthy of serious attention.’<sup>18</sup> Presumably, as Chazan begins his study in 1000 CE, he himself would concur with his observer’s estimation. Indeed, speaking of the Jewries of Northern Europe he says:

All the Jewries of northern Europe were new, much newer than the Jewish communities of the south. The Jewries of northern Europe did not have roots in the Roman world; . . . Northern-European Jewish life was a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate to be shaped by the interaction of Christian majority and Jewish immigrant minority during our period.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> H. Graetz, *History of the Jews*, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1895), 24.

<sup>16</sup> S.W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, vol. 3 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), 5–6.

<sup>17</sup> C. Roth, ed., *The World History of the Jewish People*, vol. 9: The Dark Ages: Jews in Christian Europe 711–1096, rev. ed. I.H. Levine (London: W. H. Allen, 1966) 7.

<sup>18</sup> R. Chazan, *The Jews of Medieval Western Christendom, 1000–1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

Two Israeli academics have recently taken this thesis even further. In their two-part paper “A Split Jewish Diaspora: Its Dramatic Consequences”,<sup>20</sup> Arye Edrei, a lawyer, and Doron Mendels, a historian of ancient Jewish ‘nationalism’,<sup>21</sup> maintain that there existed a fatal language divide between the western (Roman) and eastern (Persian) Jewish Diasporas. This divide led to the western Greek (*sic*) speaking Jews losing touch with both the oral *Halakhah* and the rabbis. According to Edrei and Mendels, the rabbis paid a high price for maintaining the *Jewish law* in an oral form, because, as it was not translated into Greek, the West did not develop a *Halakhah* and contributed nothing to the oral law in the East. Isolated from the rabbinic network western Jews were a receptive base for Christianity. Hence Jews in the west either converted to Christianity or remained ‘biblical Jews’ until the arrival of the ‘Rabbinic revolution’ in the ninth century.

Such an assertion, (and their papers rarely amount to more than that), could only really be made by one, to quote Peter Brown, ‘green in matters Merovingian’,<sup>22</sup> – and one might add Visigothic and Late Roman. Edrei and Mendels base their argument largely on the absence of the Diaspora from the text of the Mishnah and Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds and whilst this is a remarkable characteristic of the rabbinic texts it tells us more about the rabbis than it does about the western Diaspora.

Despite the fact that the evidence is pretty meagre there is, however, sufficient in the archeological, linguistic, and toponymic traces and in what sources survive to suggest a very different picture in the West. We are, as yet, largely ignorant of the processes that led from ‘*nomodidaskalos*’ Amaranthus to Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki (Rashi), but I suggest that a significant native Jewish community remained dispersed throughout the West which I will name ‘Romaniote.’ The term ‘Romaniote’ has been widely used for the native Jewish communities of Greece, prior to the arrival of the Sephardic Jews from Spain in the 15th century, but I wish to extend its use here to those communities in the area of the Western Roman Empire that pre-date the later divisions into Ashkenaz, Tzarfat, Canaan (Slavic eastern Europe), etc. and that underlay the later Islamic period communities of Sepharad. Given the already existent linguistic divide between Latin west and Greek east, exacerbated further by cultural and theological divisions in the Middle Ages, the Jewish communities in West and East can be characterised as ‘Greco-Romaniote’ and ‘Latino-Romaniote’ respectively.

### 3. JEWISH COMMUNITIES IN THE WEST

It is pretty vain to attempt to gauge the total number of Jews in the world in the fifth to eighth centuries. Estimates have ranged between two<sup>23</sup> and five million.<sup>24</sup> Naturally the main concentration of the Jewish population was in the east, particularly in northern Palestine

<sup>20</sup> A. Edrei, and D. Mendels, “A Split Jewish Diaspora: Its Dramatic Consequences II”, *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 17:3 (2008), 163–87; A. Edrei, and D. Mendels, “A Split Jewish Diaspora: Its Dramatic Consequences”, *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 16:2 (2007), 91–137.

<sup>21</sup> D. Mendels, *The Rise and Fall of Jewish Nationalism* (The Anchor Bible Reference Library; New York: Doubleday, 1996).

<sup>22</sup> P. Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

<sup>23</sup> B. McGing, “Population and Proselytism: How Many Jews Were There in the Ancient World?” in J.R. Bartlett, ed., *Jews in the Hellenistic and Roman Cities* (London: Routledge, 2002), 88–106.

<sup>24</sup> Baron, *Social and Religious History of the Jews*, vol. I (1956), 167–71, 369–72.

and Syria, and beyond the empire in Mesopotamia, but Jewish settlements were scattered throughout the Empire. The Sibylline Oracle had declared to the Jews in the second century *pasa de gaia sethen plerēs kai pasa thalassa* ('the whole world is full of you, and also the seas').<sup>25</sup> Jerome, commenting on Isaiah 66:20, stated that the Jews believed that at the time of the Messiah, Jews of senatorial rank would come from Britain, Spain and Gaul, '*qui . . . senatoriae fuerint dignitatis et locum principum obtinuerint, de Britannis, Hispanis Gallisque extremis hominum Morinis, et ubi bicornis finitur Rhenus, in carrucis veniant*' ('. . . who would be of senatorial dignity and have obtained high places will come in carriages from Britain, Spain and the Gauls, from the more distant tribe of the Morini (in present day Belgium; quoting Vergil) and from where the Rhine terminates its double horns').<sup>26</sup> Even later in the seventh century Cassiodorus commented on Psalm 70: '*De Iudaeis hoc dictum testatur eorum facta dispersio, ut pene per totum mundum divisi dispersique declarentur*' ('Of the Jews this saying is witnessed of their dispersion, that they are said to be divided and dispersed through almost all the world.').<sup>27</sup> Evidently it was a fact for Romans as informed as Cassiodorus and Jerome that Jews were present throughout the Empire, in particular in the west. Jewish legend also told of the coming of Jews to the west. After the destruction of the Temple, according to one version of a Jewish legend, many Jews were placed on three ships by Vespasian, without captain or crew and the wind drove them ashore; at Lyons (*sic*), Arles, and Bordeaux. The exiles left their ships and lived peacefully on land given them by prefects of the respective towns. However, a new ruler arose who subjected them to many hardships. During this period the Jews recited the prayer *vehu rahum* (וְהוּא רַחוּם) composed by two brothers, Joseph and Benjamin, and their uncle Samuel. Delivered from their tribulations by the prayer, they sent it to their brethren throughout the world, asking that it be offered every Monday and Thursday.<sup>28</sup> A second version of the legend recounts that the Jews landed in Italy, Spain and Africa. There seems to be here some memory of deportations of Jews, probably as slaves, to the west after the destruction of the Temple. Ahimaaz ben Paltiel, author of the *Chronicle of Ahimaaz*, states that his family was among the captives brought to Italy by Titus after the destruction of the Temple,<sup>29</sup> and in *Midrash Leviticus Rabbah*, Rabbi Meir who lived in the second century, refers to Spain and Gaul as the land of imprisonment.<sup>30</sup> Archaeological evidence clusters mainly around the Mediterranean littoral, though there are isolated finds on the Rhine and Danube. However, combined with references to Jewish communities in the early law codes, in Gregory of Tours and the acts of church synods, we see that there was a fairly wide distribution of Jewish communities in the period in Western Europe (see fig. 1).

By Late Antiquity Jewish communities were common throughout the western Mediterranean. Some of these were old and well established, others appear to have emerged only after the third and fourth centuries CE. These communities were not confined to the large towns, such as Naples, Rome, Carthage or Narbonne. There were also well-organised communities in smaller centres and villages and various islands; there is abundant evidence

<sup>25</sup> A. Rzach, ed., *Oracula Sibyllina* (Vienna: F. Tempsky, 1891), III, 27.

<sup>26</sup> Jerome, *In Isaiam*, 66:20, PL 24, 672.

<sup>27</sup> Cassiodorus, *Expositio in Psalterium*, Ps 58 (PL LXX, 415).

<sup>28</sup> S. Katz, *The Jews in the Visigothic and Frankish Kingdoms of Spain and Gaul* (Cambridge MA: The Mediaeval Academy of America, 1937), 6.

<sup>29</sup> M. Salzman, *The Chronicle of Ahimaaz* (New York: Columbia University Oriental Studies, 1966).

<sup>30</sup> J. Israelstam and J. J. Slotki, *Midrash Rabbah: Leviticus*, vol. 4 (London: Soncino, 1939, 3rd ed. 1961), 69.



in Sicily and Sardinia as well as Malta and Lipari and the Balearics for a strong Jewish presence.<sup>31</sup>

The archaeological and epigraphic evidence suggests that during Late Antiquity the Jewish community began to flourish in an unprecedented way. The way in which new archaeological discoveries help transform the understanding of the natures of Jewish settlement is illustrated by the recent discoveries at Bova Marina, not far from Reggio di Calabria in the extreme south of Italy.<sup>32</sup> For most of its history Bova was an inconspicuous little town. In Late Antiquity, however, it began to prosper and Jews apparently shared in the settlement's sudden rise to prominence. In the course of the fourth century, the Jewish community of Bova erected a synagogue, of which some walls and an elegant mosaic floor remain. The building was remodeled several times, but maintained its original function until well into the sixth century. It is not known when or why the building fell into disuse, but whatever the reason, it is clear that here, as in other parts, Jews were able and willing to settle in areas where they had been absent previously. The abundance of Jewish archaeological and epigraphic evidence has been interpreted as indicating a growth in the community due to Jewish proselytism,<sup>33</sup> but we must be careful of such easy interpretations of the evidence as new evidence on the demography of the Jewish community of Rome strongly suggests that population movement rather than growth better explains the data.<sup>34</sup>

The Jewish community of Rome was among the oldest Jewish communities in Italy and throughout Antiquity and the Middle Ages remained the most numerous one. Practically all we know about it in Late Antiquity derives from a number of Jewish catacombs and hypogaea located outside the city. These provide a wealth of material evidence of the Jewish community in the period from the late second to the early fifth centuries CE. Greek and Latin dominate the epigraphic record, and it is the type of *koiné* Greek and vulgar Latin that is encountered in non-Jewish inscriptions dating to the same general period. The onomastic evidence similarly points to a high degree of integration of the Jewish community into the surrounding society. Although names of near-eastern derivation do occur, Greek and Latin names predominate. Nevertheless the inscriptions frequently contain evidence of a strong allegiance to Judaism. Many carry renderings of Jewish symbols, in particular the menorah, but such allegiance could also be expressed in words; there is a significant portion of the inscriptions which carry words (including neologisms) referring to the person's position or role within the Jewish community. The evidence from Rome seemingly shows a distinct but integrated community, but if we turn to the evidence from the slightly later catacombs in Venosa in Basilicata we see a very different picture.

It is not certain when the community in Venosa was founded, but it is certain that, once it was created, Jews continued to live in Venosa for several centuries. The evidence indicates that even after the Jewish catacombs had gone out of use, Jews continued to bury their dead

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<sup>31</sup> See the epigraphic evidence in D. Noy, *Jewish Inscriptions in Western Europe*: vol. 1, *Italy (excluding Rome), Spain and Gaul*; vol. 2, *The City of Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 1995).

<sup>32</sup> L. Costamagna, "La sinagoga di Bova Marina nel quadro degli inediamenti tardoantichi della costa Ionica meridionale della Calabria", *MEFR* 103 (1991), 611–30.

<sup>33</sup> L.H. Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

<sup>34</sup> See the work of L.V. Rutgers, *The Jews in Late Ancient Rome* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995); and *The Hidden Heritage of Diaspora Judaism* (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 1998).

on top of the hill inside which their ancestors had previously entombed their dead.<sup>35</sup> At Venosa, however, there is a move from Greek to Latin inscriptions; indeed the number of Latin inscriptions increases deeper inside the catacombs in areas dateable from the fifth to sixth centuries CE. It is also notable that one inscription refers to *maiores civitatis*, that is to Jews as public officials who served not only their own community but the entire town in which they lived.<sup>36</sup>

Further north and west and away from Italy we must rely on the Christian chronicles and law codes. This material has long been admirably and comprehensively treated by both Solomon Katz and Bernhard Blumenkranz.<sup>37</sup> What is most surprising in this material is the degree of interaction between Jews and Gentiles that it reveals. The law codes and church canons are all very keen to keep separate the two communities to an extent that can only be explained if the behaviour being regulated was actually fairly common, whether it be intermarriage, dining together, gentiles attending Jewish sermons (in the vernacular), or involvement in civil and military affairs. What is less surprising, but more relevant to our argument, is the evidence for Jewish involvement in the long distance trade in luxury items and slaves, as this provides evidence that Jews in the west would have had the means to maintain cultural contacts with the Land of Israel. From the fifth century more and more Jews were attracted into commercial pursuits, largely from necessity as other activities (the professions and public office) were being closed to them.

That Jewish merchants often went to the east for trade is shown by an amusing anecdote related by Notker Balbulus. Charlemagne ordered a certain Jewish merchant, who often went to Palestine and brought back with him rare and costly articles, to deceive the vainglorious bishop of Mainz. The merchant sold the bishop a common mouse under the pretence that it was a very unusual and precious animal from Judaea.<sup>38</sup> These Jewish commercial contacts with the Middle East maintained throughout the period provided the means by which Hebrew literature and learning could reach the distant communities of the west.

The law codes also reveal that Jews were much more involved in agriculture than was to be the case in the later Middle Ages. For example, a decree of the Council of Elvira (306) shows that the Jews of Spain were accustomed to offer prayers for their crops and for those of their Christian neighbours, a practice the council forbade.<sup>39</sup> Recent work by Norman Golb,<sup>40</sup> however, has indicated more clearly how extensive this involvement in agriculture might have been in the west. Whilst researching the early history of the medieval Jewish community of Rouen, Golb turned his attention to local toponymics that clearly referred to Jews in the Norman countryside. Golb found numerous '*Rues des Juifs*' that indicated relatively heavy Jewish settlement in the region in early centuries. No documentation exists to show precisely when these settlements may have occurred and studies of Norman history

<sup>35</sup> There are many medieval Jewish gravestones datable to the years 808-48 incorporated into the walls of the nearby abbey church of the Holy Trinity.

<sup>36</sup> JIWE I, 86 *vide infra*, 10.

<sup>37</sup> Katz, *The Jews in the Visigothic and Frankish Kingdoms of Spain and Gaul* (Cambridge MA: The Mediaeval Academy of America, 1937); B. Blumenkranz, *Juifs et chrétiens dans le monde occidental, 430-1096* (Paris: Mouton et Co, 1960).

<sup>38</sup> G. Meyer von Knonau, *Monachus Sangallensis (Notkerus Balbulus) de Carolo Magno* (St Gall: Fehr'sche Buchhandlung, 1920), I, 16.

<sup>39</sup> A. Linder, *The Jews in the Legal Sources of the Early Middle Ages* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 483.

<sup>40</sup> N. Golb, *The Jews in Medieval Normandy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

had assumed that it betokens only the presence of small numbers of Jewish merchants or moneylenders in those streets during the Middle Ages. Golb's evidence, however, argues against this assumption. If the Jews formed only a late accretion to the original population, the 'Streets of the Jews' would not be so centrally located within the towns as they often are, notably in Rouen and Rheims. Similarly the presence of so significant a number of such streets in the countryside indicates land-cultivating settlements granted agricultural estates in the provinces in the heyday of Roman colonisation. The use of the designation "Rue des Juifs" not only for a street but also for a hamlet, such as is found in Quincampoix, Préaux and Norrey-en-Auge is rendered understandable on the basis of the older Latin meaning of *vicus* (> Fr. *voie*) as a place of settlement. Similarly, such designations of hamlets as "Les Juifs," "La Juiverie," and "Hamel (or Hameau) aux Juifs," also appear to be vestiges of the Latin expression *Vicus Iudaeorum*. A further indication that these many 'Streets of the Jews' had their origin not in the Middle Ages but in a far earlier period is the fact that the Jews of Normandy are never mentioned in the sources as newcomers. The evidence from Golb's chosen region of Normandy with Rothomagus (Rouen) as its capital is doubtless a paradigm of the situation elsewhere lying as yet unexamined in the topographic evidence.

#### 4. HEBREW CULTURE IN THE WEST

##### *a. Hebrew Language*

On 4 July 585 Guntram, King of the Franks in Neustria (north-west France), visited Orléans on his way to a meeting with his newly baptised nephew Lothar. On his arrival he was greeted by the populace with the ritual *acclamationes* usual for a visiting Roman *imperator*. Gregory of Tours recounts;

A vast crowd of citizens came out to meet him, carrying flags and banners, and singing songs in his praise. The speech of the Syrians contrasted sharply with that of those using Latin and again with that of the Jews, as they each sang his praises in their own tongue. . . . The Jews played a full part in those acclamations. "Let all peoples reverence you and bow the knee before you and submit to your rule!" they kept shouting.<sup>41</sup>

The Jewish community of Orléans was evidently of some importance in the city and well-established for they hoped that Guntram would offer them restitution for a synagogue in the city that had been destroyed some time previously by Christians. In this they were to be disappointed.<sup>42</sup> However, the incident does indicate three distinctive ethnic groups, with three distinct languages; the undoubtedly Greek-speaking Byzantine Syrian merchants, the

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<sup>41</sup> Processitque in obviam eius inmensa populi turba cum signis adque vexillis canentes laudes. Et hinc lingua Syrorum, hinc Latinorum, hinc etiam ipsorum Iudaeorum in diversis laudibus variae concrepabat, dicens: 'Vivat rex, regnumque eius in populis annis innumeris dilatetur'. Iudaei vero, qui in his laudibus videbantur esse participes, dicebant: 'Omnes gentes te adorent tibi que genu flectant adque tibi sint subditi.' Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum*, VIII, 1. MGH I, 326.

<sup>42</sup> That the Jews did not place too much faith in Guntram must be deduced from the reference in their acclamation to *Esther* 3:2; 'and all the servants of the King who were in the King's gate bowed the knee and revered Haman' (Vulgate: *Cunctique servi regis, qui in foribus palatii versabantur, flectebant genua, et adorabant Aman*), a reference Gregory seems to have missed.

(Vulgar?) Latin-speaking Gallo-Romans, and the Jews using ‘lingua Judaeorum’, i.e. Hebrew. This is a rare reference to the use of Hebrew by Jews in Western Europe in the period, but we can also find evidence that the use of Hebrew was current and widespread from the linguistic and epigraphic record.

Table 1 charts the use of Latin, Greek and Hebrew in Jewish epigraphy of the fourth to seventh centuries. If we compare this with the Jewish epigraphic record from the Roman catacombs, which is overwhelmingly Greek (*vide supra*), we can see two distinct trends. Firstly, there is an increase in the use of Latin. 38% of the total epigraphic record uses Latin as opposed to 46% with Greek; and this even with the large number of Greek inscriptions from the Venosa catacombs. Secondly, there is a dramatic increase in the use of Hebrew; over 50% of the inscriptions have some Hebrew. By the eighth century all-Hebrew inscriptions have become the norm.<sup>43</sup>

	Greek only	Greek and Hebrew	Hebrew only	Hebrew and Latin	Latin only	Trilingual
Gaul	0	0	0	2	2	0
N. Italy	3	1	2	10	7	2
S. Italy and Sicily	13	3	4	12	2	0
Venosa	31	12	10	9	10	0
Sardinia and Malta	6	0	4	4	0	0
Spain	3	1	0	1	1	2
Western Europe	56	17	20	38	22	4
% main language	46%		13%	38%		3%
% with Hebrew	35%	48%			14%	3%

Table 1. *Languages Used in Jewish Epigraphy, 4th–7th Centuries*  
(compiled from *JWE 1 and 2*).

In many cases the Hebrew is nothing more than the simple formula ŠLWM ‘L ÝŠR’L (שלום על ישראל ‘peace be on Israel’). Nevertheless it is noteworthy that in the majority of cases it is grammatically and orthographically correct. In contrast the Latin shows an increasing tendency to Vulgar Latin. The early sixth century epitaph<sup>44</sup> from the catacombs at Venosa referred to earlier illustrates this:

hic ciscued Faustina | filia Faustini pat(ris), annorum | quattuordecim μηνsurum | quinque, que  
fuet unica paren | turum, quei dixerunt τρηnus | duo apostuli et duo rebbites et | satis grandem  
dolurem fecet pa | rentibus et lagremas cibita | ti. |

משכה של פווסטינה  
נוח נפש שלום

que fuet pronepus Faustini | pat(ris) et nepus Biti et Acelli, | qui fuerunt maiores cibi | tatis.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>43</sup> *JWE I*, 196, 198–200.

<sup>44</sup> *JWE I*, 86, 114.

<sup>45</sup> ‘Here rests Faustina, daughter of Faustinus the father, aged fourteen years five months. She was her parents’ only child. Two apostles and two rabbis spoke the dirges for her, and she made great enough grief for her parents and tears for the community.

Resting place of Faustina. May her soul rest. Peace.

She was the great-granddaughter of Faustinus the father, granddaughter of Vitus and Asellus who were leaders of the community.’

The Latin shows the Vulgar Latin confusion of *ō* and *ū* (*dolurem, nepus* for *dolorem, nepos*), and *ē* and *ī* (*fuet, lagremas, fecet* for *fuit, lagrimas, fecit*); Greek letters (*η* and probably a lunate sigma in *Acelli* for *Asellus*); the substitution of the second declension plural in *parentorum* for third declension *parentum*; ‘*c*’ for ‘*qu*’ in *ciscued* for *quiesquit* and the confusion of ‘*b*’ and ‘*v*’ in *cibitati* (*civitas*). The Latin is not learned and this is indicative of the way the Jewish community was being excluded from Latin learning despite the fact that this is the epitaph of a member of a notable local family. Clearly the Jews of Venosa were integrated enough to be speaking the vernacular but the community was also, as we see from its greater use of Hebrew in the inscriptions, increasingly falling back on its Jewish identity, learning and culture represented by Hebrew.

David Blondheim in his *Les parlers judéo-romans et la Vetus Latina* published in 1925 claimed that ‘Jewish Romance vernaculars’ were descendants of a ‘Judeo-Latin’ specific to the Jewish communities that evolved parallel to Vulgar Latin. This theory has now been largely rejected in favour of the idea that Jews shared the vernaculars of the surrounding communities. Umberto Cassuto, however, whilst rejecting Blondheim’s theory, did postulate a common Jewish *koiné* (at least for Judeo-Italian).<sup>46</sup> What is clear is that the Judeo-Romance vernaculars had a lexical register for specifically Jewish items or practices. This can be observed in the very early Romance borrowings into Yiddish: Yid. *orn* < *orare* ‘pray’, *bentshn* < *benedicere*, ‘to say the blessing’, *leyen* < *legere* ‘to read the Torah’, *shul* < *schola* ‘synagogue’, *tetschen* < *tocare* ‘to blow the shofar’, *tsholnt* < *calentem* (?) ‘Sabbath stew’ (cf. Old French *chalt* ‘warm’). Similarly we have the Latin names *Shneyer* < *Senior(em)* ‘Elder’, *Fayvl* < *Vitalis*, *Fayvish* < *Vivus* (both clearly calques for Hebrew *Hayyim*). We also have Romance versions of the names of the more important Rhenish cities preserved in medieval Jewish documents; ŠPYR’, שפירא (Speyer, Late Latin *Spira*), GRMYYS’, גרמייסא (Worms < Gallo-Roman \**Gormaiça* < Late Latin *Vormatia*),<sup>47</sup> TRBRS, טרברס (Trier, < \**Treveres*, L. *Augusta Treverorum*), MGNZ’, מגנצא (Mainz, < \**Magencā* (cf. French *Mayence*) < *Moguntiacum*), QWLWNI’, קולוניא (Cologne < L. *Colonia*). These borrowings into Yiddish reflect early developments in Gallo-Romance and must have been taken into proto-Yiddish early in the formation of Ashkenaz in the area of Lotharingia in the eighth to ninth centuries.<sup>48</sup>

One lexical item in particular, common to all the Jewish languages of Europe, points to a distinct common ‘Romaniote’ substrate. This is the verb that appears as *miauder, meltare, meldar* (*et alia*). These local forms all evolve ultimately from the Greek verb *meletan*, ‘to meditate’ used in the Septuagint as the translation of the Hebrew root HGH (הגה). From its use in the Bible the word came to mean ‘study’ and this meaning was attached to the cognate Late Latin borrowing from Greek, *meletare*. This verb came to be used by Jews to mean specifically

<sup>46</sup> U. Cassuto, “Un’antichissima elegia in dialetto giudeo-italiano”, *Archivio glottologico italiano* 22–3 (1929), 349–408.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. French *guerre* < Old High German *werra*.

<sup>48</sup> M. Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language* (New York: YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 1980), 328–47. Weinreich attempts to differentiate influences from ‘Western Lo`ez’ (Gallo-Romance) and ‘Southern Lo`ez’ (Italo-Romance) as due to ninth- to tenth-century immigrants from France (Tzarfat) and Italy respectively. He does not seem to consider that the Romance forms with /*ě*/ instead of /*ε*/ may be derived from an earlier Rhaeto-Romance substrate in the area that is now Switzerland. Rhaeto-Romance languages exist today in Romansch, Ladin and Friulian but historically extended much further north.

‘study of the Torah’ and was consequently used by Jews in preference to the verb *meditari*, the Latin word used by Jerome in the Vulgate to translate הגה.<sup>49</sup>

The various traditional pronunciations of ‘whole Hebrew’ (i.e. the written Hebrew text as opposed to Hebrew words taken over as loan-words into the vernacular) may also tell us something about the influences on Romaniote Jews. The pronunciation of Hebrew was assimilated to the pronunciation of the surrounding language.<sup>50</sup> Thus only in Yemen all the phonemic distinctions of Hebrew are maintained:  $\text{v} = /w/$ ; the emphatics remain  $/s/$ ,  $/t/$ ,  $/q/$ ; as do the gutturals  $/ʔ/$ ,  $/ħ/$ ,  $/h/$  as all of these sounds appear in Classical Arabic. However, the double realisation of the ‘BeGaDKePaT’ (בגדכפת) letters is maintained with  $/b/ \sim /v/$ ,  $/d/ \sim /ð/$ ,  $/k/ \sim /χ/$ ,  $/p/ \sim /f/$ , and  $/t/ \sim /θ/$ , but the voiced velar stop  $/g/$  does not appear in Classical Arabic where it is replaced by  $/dž/$  and the realisation of  $\text{g}$  is thus  $/dž/ \sim /γ/$ . Likewise in Europe the emphatics and the gutturals are assimilated to the sounds available in the dominant language; the emphatics  $/s/$ ,  $/t/$ ,  $/q/$ , and pharyngeal  $/h/$  become  $/s/$ ,  $/t/$ ,  $/k/$ , and  $/χ/$  respectively; the pharyngeal  $/ħ/$  is assimilated to the glottal stop  $/ʔ/$  (or becomes  $/ŋ/$  in Italo-Hebrew). In the Romance-speaking areas where there is no  $/š/$ ,  $/ś/$  and  $/s/$  fall together as  $/s/$ . In all areas  $\text{v}$  becomes  $/v/$ . Whilst most of these changes are shared by all the Jewish communities, there is a notable difference in the realisation of *tav raphe* ת. In Yemeni Hebrew this is preserved as  $/θ/$  as, presumably, it was in Greco-Romaniote, however in Italo-Hebrew it was voiced to  $/ð/$  (cf. Italian *carità* < \**caritað* < \**caritad* < Latin *carita* *t(em)*) and in both Ashkenaz and Provençal Hebrew the *tav* is assimilated to *samekh*; in Ashkenaz both >  $/s/$ , in Provence both >  $/f/$ . In all these areas the realisation of *tav raphe* is different but all maintain *tav raphe* as a fricative. On the other hand, in the areas where Babylonian influence was strongest (Spain, North Africa and Persia) and the original unvoiced fricative was not available (i.e. outside natively Semitic areas of the Arabian Peninsula and the Fertile Crescent), we see a different realisation, for here the assimilation is to the stop  $/t/$  rather than the fricative. This parallels the local pronunciation of Arabic in these areas (including Andalusia) – see table 2.

samekh	tav raphe	tav	
/s/	/θ/	/t/	Hebrew
/s/	/θ/	/t/	Yemeni
/s/	/θ/	/t/	Greco-Romaniote
/s/	/ð/ > /d/	/t/	Italy
	/s/	/t/	Ashkenaz
	/f/	/t/	Provence
/s/		/t/	Sepharad
/s/		/t/	North Africa
/s/		/t/	Persia

Table 2. Realisation of Tav, Tav Raphe and Samekh in Hebrew According to Region.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>49</sup> A memory of this Latinophone Romaniote Jewry may remain in the use of the Hebrew term ‘la’az’ (לעז) for the (specifically Romance) vernacular languages, a usage that parallels that of the Germanic terms ‘Wälisch/Welsh/Vlach’ for the indigenous Latin-using or Romance-speaking populations of former territories of the Roman Empire. We may also note the use of the cognate term *velish* for the more cursive Hebrew script of Italian and Spanish Torah scrolls.

<sup>50</sup> For Ashkenaz see Weinreich, *History*. For Sepharad, compare P. Wexler, *Non-Jewish Origins of the Sephardic Jews* (New York: SUNY Press, 1996).

<sup>51</sup> See ‘Hebrew pronunciation’, *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (New York: Macmillan, 1971–72).

That is to say there is a distinct divide between those communities that maintain the distinction between the allophones of *tav* and those which assimilate them, a distinction that corresponds to the areas of ‘Palestinian’ and ‘Babylonian’ influence; that is, those areas in which the pronunciation of Hebrew predates the Arabic conquests of North Africa and Iberia, and those areas united by the Arabic conquests where the influence of the Babylonian Gaonate and Arabic languages predominated.

Ashkenazic Hebrew has departed most markedly from the generally accepted ‘Tiberian’ pronunciation. Mostly this is due to changes in the pronunciation within the Yiddish form of German, thus /o/ > /oj/ in the Ashkenazi pronunciation of *Moshe* as ‘*Moyshē*’ and in the change from Middle High German *grôz* > Yiddish *groys*,<sup>52</sup> but there are two distinct characteristics of Ashkenazi Hebrew that set it apart from the others. The first of these is the penultimate stress pattern of Ashkenazi Hebrew. This is paralleled by the penultimate stress of Germanic languages, but it also parallels the stress pattern seen in Biblical Hebrew pausal forms. Penultimate stress is also found in Samaritan Hebrew and may be indicated by some of the orthographies of Qumran.<sup>53</sup> It may be that the German stress pattern helped preserve the original Hebrew accent rather than supplanted a final stress. Here Ashkenazi Hebrew may have preserved a trait of Palestinian Hebrew. The second characteristic of Ashkenazic Hebrew is the realisation of *qameš* as /o/. Yemeni Hebrew, strongly influenced by Babylonia, shares the same realisation of *qameš*. Weinreich makes a strong case for these changes in Ashkenazi Hebrew being the result of a ‘Babylonian Renaissance’ in Ashkenaz in the thirteenth century as the difference is only noted in Sephardic texts from that date. Before the establishment of the ‘Tiberian’ seven-vowel system after the tenth century there were two vowel systems in use: a southern Palestinian system with symbols representing five vowels in which *qameš* fell together with ‘i’ and *segol* fell together with *šere* as /a/ and /e/ respectively; and a Babylonian system with six vowel symbols in which *qameš* is open /o/, *šere* is /e/, and *pataḥ* and *segol* fall together as /a/. In 930 Jacob Alchami noted that the Babylonian reading ‘had filled the world’ from the eastern border of the Byzantine Empire to the borders of China. About the same time the Karaite Kirkisani reports that the Greco-Romaniote Jews do not know of a *qameš* /o/. Transcriptions of Hebrew in French manuscripts of the tenth to thirteenth century similarly show *qameš* /a/: *ahawta*, *laolam*, *Adam* etc. This western Romaniote sphere, ‘from southern Palestine to the Atlantic, from the edges of the Sahara to the northernmost settlements in central Europe’<sup>54</sup> utilised the five-vowel ‘Sephardi’ vocalisation.<sup>55</sup>

If the Romaniote communities of Europe had received their Hebrew from the South after the Arab invasions of the seventh-eighth centuries we would expect a much more standardised pronunciation of the Hebrew consonant system and in particular an ‘Arabised’ realisation of *tav raphē*. Conversely, that a Palestinian vowel system should have established itself so widely that it was able to resist ‘Babylonisation’ up until and beyond the Ashkenazi ‘renaissance’ of the thirteenth century implies that the pronunciation must have firmly

<sup>52</sup> S.A. Birnbaum, *Yiddish: A Survey and a Grammar* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1979).

<sup>53</sup> A. Sáenz-Badillos, *History of the Hebrew Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 139.

<sup>54</sup> Weinreich, *History*, 364 ff.

<sup>55</sup> The picture is confused because, (particularly after 1492), the ‘Sephardic’ and Tiberian pronunciations supplanted any vestiges of the Babylonian system that may have remained in the oriental communities other than Yemen.

established itself before the decline of the Southern Palestinian centres in the fifth-sixth centuries.<sup>56</sup>

### b. *Volumina Hebraica*

Edrei and Mendels argue that the literature of the western Diaspora is reflected in the extensive Greek apocrypha and pseudepigrapha. But there is little evidence of a continuing interest in this literature in the Jewish community in Late Antiquity or the early Middle Ages. In fact its survival is a result of *Christian* interest. The evidence we have given above shows rather a distinct decline in the quality of Greek and Latin learning among Jewish communities and a consequent need to fall back on Hebrew learning and letters.<sup>57</sup> In fact we know from documents in the Cairo Genizah that by the ninth century Jews were writing Greek in a Hebrew *abjad*,<sup>58</sup> doubtless the ability to handle Latin literature in the west was even less. If the access to Latin and Greek literature was in sharp decline in the Diaspora, we do have suggestive evidence that the Jewish communities still maintained a written Hebrew-centred culture, which could only deepen with time.

There exists an account by a local bishop, Severus, of how in 417/8 a well-established Jewish community of one of the two towns on Minorca was converted under the threat of mass violence, and its synagogue destroyed and turned into a church.<sup>59</sup> The account reveals the large size of the Jewish community (at least 540 persons) in the small town of Mago and describes the community's leader Theodorus as having held all the offices within the town council (*curia*) and as *defensor* (*judge*) and *patronus* (*patron*) of his fellow citizens. He seemingly held some sort of "rabbinic" role within the community for he is described as *legis doctor* (teacher of the law).<sup>60</sup> The occasion of the community's conversion was the arrival in the island of the relics of St Stephen. The Christians of Iammo marched on the other town of Mago, invited the Jews to debate, and when this was met with stones hurled by the Jewish women, advanced on the synagogue and burnt it down. First, however, they removed the

<sup>56</sup> An interesting footnote to this question of the knowledge of Hebrew in the west is provided by Irish Latin poets who wrote verse in an elaborate style influential until around 700. These were collected as the *Hisperica Famina* in the sixth and seventh centuries. One poem contains the lines:

patham lizanam      sennas atque michinas, (corr. nachiras?)  
cladum carsum      madianum talias  
bathma exugiam      atque binas idumas. (Lorica of Laidcenn)

'(Deliver) my mouth?, my tongue, my teeth and nostrils? | my neck, breast, side and limbs, | joints, fat, and two hands.'

Certain words here are clearly not 'Hebrew' as the commentary suggests, but Aramaic (M.W. Herren, *Hisperica Famina* II (1987), 80): lizana לִזְנָא, senna שְׁנָא, nachira נַחֲרִיא, iduma אִדְמָא (dual?), transposing the Aramaic emphatic forms to the first declension. The actual source may be Christian Syriac rather than Jewish, but it seems perverse to argue, as Edrei and Mendels do, that Jews would not have access to Hebrew or Aramaic when monks in distant Ireland obviously did.

<sup>57</sup> N. De Lange, "Jews in the Age of Justinian", in M. Maas, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 401–27.

<sup>58</sup> N. De Lange, *Greek Jewish Texts from the Cairo Genizah* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1996).

<sup>59</sup> PL XX, 731–46 and XLI, 821–32; E.D. Hunt, "St Stephen in Minorca. An Episode in Jewish-Christian Relations in the Early Fifth Century a.d.", *Journal of Theological Studies* 33 (1982), 106; S. Bradbury, *Severus of Minorca* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Amarantus the 'nomodidaskalos' *supra*. Jerome uses the same expression to describe the learned Jew from Tiberias who in the late 380s helped him with proper names in Chronicles, PL XXIX, 401ff.

*libri sancti* (sacred books) with their silver ornaments. The silver ornaments were returned but the *libri sancti* were removed, allegedly to protect them from the Jews themselves (*ne apud Iudaeos iniuriam paterentur*)! As a demonstration of their new faith, after baptism, the converted Jews were obliged to dig up the foundations of the synagogue and build a new basilica with their own hands and financed from their own funds. This would not be the only such episode in the period but we might question how permanent such conversions were once the bishop had returned to Iammo, but doubtless the *libri sancti* were confiscated in truth because they purported to be more authentic than the versions used by the Christians, either because they were in the original Hebrew or a translation that was based on the Hebrew rather than the Greek of the Septuagint.

Whether the synagogue scrolls of Mago were Hebrew, Greek or Latin we cannot tell from the narrative, but this hostility to the Hebrew version must be born in mind when we examine the evidence of Justinian's famous *novella* 146, dated February 8, 553, which although it was promulgated in the Greek east was also law for the areas of Italy, Africa and Spain re-conquered by Justinian and which, as we will see, had an influence on the later, influential Visigothic laws.

The *novella* attempts to regulate the language in which the Torah was read in synagogue following an alleged dispute;

We have learnt from their petitions, which they have addressed to us, that while some maintain the Hebrew language only and want to use it in reading the Holy Books others consider it right to admit Greek *as well*, and they have already been quarrelling among themselves about this for a long time. Having therefore studied this matter we decided that the better case is that of those who want to use *also* Greek in reading the Holy Books, and generally in any language that is more suited and the better known to the hearers in each locality.<sup>61</sup>

The translation of the seventy, the Septuagint, had been accepted by many Jews including Philo and Josephus as divinely inspired and it may be that some synagogues therefore used only a Greek text for the public reading, but the simpler reading is that some Jews wanted a Greek reading *in addition* to the Hebrew, presumably in the same manner as the Aramaic Targum, and were holding out against Hebraic purists. Justinian decrees that;

it shall be permitted to those Hebrews who want it to read the Holy Books . . . in the Greek language, . . . or possibly in our ancestral language (we speak of the Italian language), or simply in all the other languages.

It may seem that Justinian's intention here is benign but it is clear from the next section that his desire is in fact to establish the Septuagint as the authorised translation because its adoption as the Christian Bible had resulted in the development of a specifically Christian hermeneutic of the text which would make the Jews vulnerable in dispute.<sup>62</sup> As Justinian continues:

Furthermore those who read in Greek shall use the Septuagint tradition, which is more accurate than all the others, and is preferable to the others . . . and that they shall not turn to the naked letters but perceive the reality and grasp the more divine sense and . . . they shall become readier to learn the better matters (i.e. the New Testament).

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<sup>61</sup> Translation from A. Linder, *The Jews in Roman Imperial Legislation* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987) [my emphases].

<sup>62</sup> This may well be why there existed a Hebraic purist group in the first place.

Nevertheless Justinian must have been aware that it would be impossible to force the Jews to use the Septuagint and, having voiced these pious hopes, is forced to make a concession, that the Jews may use the translation of Aquila.

Little now remains of Aquila's translation, but its main characteristic is its thoroughgoing literalness. This has been related, no doubt rightly, to the hermeneutical teaching of Aquila's master, R. Akiva, who emphasised the importance of every word of the text even the particles, but this results in making the Greek almost unreadable. Thus Genesis 1:1 is rendered:

*En kephalaioi ektisen ho theos syn ton ouranon kai syn ten gen.*

Aquila here uses *syn* adverbially to represent the Hebrew objective particle *et*. *Kephalaion* more usually meaning 'chapter' or 'capital' is used instead of the Septuagint's *archē* because of its relationship to *kephalē* 'head', thus maintaining the relationship in Hebrew between *reshit* 'beginning' and *rosh* 'head'. The effect is to render Aquila's version not so much a calqued translation as effectively an interlinear one that not only assumes the primacy of the Hebrew text, but also its actual presence alongside the translation.

An interesting correspondence between Augustine and Jerome testifies to the presence of Hebrew scrolls also in the west. Augustine reports that a fellow bishop at Oea in Tripolitania had been forced by violent reactions among his congregation, especially the Greeks, when faced with a controversial reading in Jonah, to ask the local Jews what reading there was in their *Hebraei codices*.<sup>63</sup> It would be strange that the Jews had the Bible in the form of a *codex* (book), but, Jerome, replying to Augustine on this point, quietly corrects him and speaks of the reading to be found "in the *volumina* [scrolls] of the Jews."<sup>64</sup> Jerome further reports how in Rome he was given some *volumina* by a "Hebraeus" who had borrowed them from a synagogue with the intention of reading them.<sup>65</sup> In this case *volumina* clearly does mean scrolls and was clearly in Hebrew for Jerome had to unroll one of them to read the relevant passage – *volumen Hebraeum replica*.<sup>66</sup>

### c. Oral Tradition

From written texts we must now turn to the Oral tradition. If the Jews of the Diaspora are to be shown to be more than 'Biblical Jews', then we need to find indications that they were open to the rabbinic development of the Mishnah and Talmud. These extra-biblical teachings were the second item on which Justinian attempted to legislate in *novella* 146 under the name of *deuterosis*, clearly a translation of 'Mishnah.' Justinian explicitly states the commentators are Hebrew-based:

We also order that there shall be no licence to the commentators they have, who employ the Hebrew language to falsify it at their will, covering their own malignity by the ignorance of the many. . .

What they call *deuterosis* . . . we prohibit entirely, for it is not included among the holy books, nor was it handed down from above by the prophets, but it is an invention of men in their chatter,

<sup>63</sup> Augustine, Ep. 71, 5. PL 33.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, Ep. 75, 22.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, Ep. 36, 1.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, Ep. 36, 13.

exclusively of earthly origin and having nothing of the divine. Let them read the holy words themselves . . . without accepting extraneous and unwritten nonsense they themselves have contrived to the perdition of the more simple minded.

Clearly this refers to an extra-Biblical teaching accessible only to a learned Hebrew-speaking élite within the community, the *archipherekita*, *presbuteroi*, and *didaskoloi*, mentioned later in the *novella* as having authority to punish or excommunicate; these are surely men like Theodorus, the *doctor legis* ('teacher of the law') of Mago, playing a 'rabbinic' role in the community.

Augustine also writes of the Jewish oral tradition:

He does not know, however, that in addition to the legal and prophetic scriptures the Jews have certain of their traditions, which they keep not in written form but committed to memory, and pass on orally to others. These traditions they call *deuterosis*.<sup>67</sup>

Justinian's *novella* seems to have influenced the seventh-century *Lex Visigothorum*<sup>68</sup> which, whilst it does not mention the *deuterosis* as such, nevertheless proscribes 'those books or doctrines . . . in which things are evilly expressed against the faith of Christ'. The law specifically forbids on pain of flogging and perpetual exile the teaching of these books and doctrines to children over the age of ten. The distinction between 'books' and 'doctrine' seems to hint at the distinction between written and oral traditions. It may be pertinent that the law specifies the age of ten in particular as this is the age recommended by *Pirkei Avot* as that at which a child should turn to the specifically Jewish teaching of the Mishnah.<sup>69</sup>

Of course we should not be too surprised to find little evidence of *halakhic* practice in the records we have for the period. For the Christian authorities, in as much as they were aware of them or had access to them, the Mishnah and Gemara were merely man-made superstition. What constituted an offence to Christianity was the continued Jewish observation of the covenant of the "Old Testament", practices that had been rendered inefficacious by the new covenant in Christ. It was the practice of the old law which presented a constant temptation to Christian 'Judaizers' and that the authorities attempted to legislate against. Secular and religious codes and church polemics are therefore concerned only with the egregious 'biblical' practices of Judaism, sabbath observance, *kashrut*, and so forth. Gregory of Tours, however, recounts at least one incident in sixth century Gaul that shows an adherence to *halakhah*. King Chilperic had engaged a certain Jew named Priscus in a theological debate, such that the only outcome could be the conversion of Priscus. Priscus had managed to put off the inevitable until his son could be safely sent away to marriage in Marseilles but,

'in the meantime a quarrel arose between Priscus and Pathir, a converted Jew, who was son to the king in that he [Chilperic] had sponsored him at his baptism. One Jewish Sabbath Priscus was on his way to the synagogue, wrapped in his prayer shawl (*praecinclus orario*)<sup>70</sup> and carrying no weapon in his hand, for he was about to pray according to the Mosaic law.

<sup>67</sup> *Nescit autem habere prater scripturas legitimas et propheticas Iudaeos quasdam traditiones suas, quas non scriptas habent, sed memoriter tenent et alter in alterum loquendo transfundit, quas deuterosis vocant.* Augustine, *Contra adversarium legis et Prophetarum* 2.1.2 (CCSL 94.87f).

<sup>68</sup> A. Linder, *The Jews in the Legal Sources*, 302.

<sup>69</sup> *Pirkei Avot* 5, 24.

<sup>70</sup> Lewis Thorpe translates "his head bound in a napkin" (*Gregory of Tours. The History of the Franks*, tr. Lewis Thorpe 1974). *Orarium* did indeed denote a napkin in classical Latin, but by the council of Laodicea (363) the Greek equivalent *orarium* had come to mean the broad, usually fringed, liturgical scarf of Christian clergy. This use of the term was first recorded in the west at the council of Braga in 561. Clearly it is used here to mean the Jewish prayer shawl or *talleth*.

Priscus, doubtless aware of the danger he was in, nevertheless refused to carry a weapon, because, according to the Mishnah tractate Shabbat; 'A man should not go out on (the Sabbath) carrying a sword, a bow, a cudgel, a stick, or a spear.' Rabbi Eliezer had argued that such things could be considered adornments which would allow them to be carried on the Sabbath, but the Sages replied: 'They [weapons] are a disgrace, as it is written, "And they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore (Is. 2:4)."'<sup>71</sup> The Sabbath should be a presentiment of the world to come in which instruments of violence would have no place. But sixth-century Paris was a very different place from the world to come and Priscus' observance proved fatal, for 'Phatir appeared suddenly, and cut the throat of Priscus and his companions with his sword.'<sup>72</sup>

The other part of the oral tradition, the liturgy, we can say little about at this early date as the earliest texts outside the Talmud date from the tenth century at the earliest. Efforts have been made to classify the varieties of the liturgy into 'rites' but these are largely an artifice of later standardisation after the production of printed liturgies from the fifteenth century. However, we may have a liturgical reference in an artefact from Spain.<sup>73</sup> This is a white marble trough found in Tarragona and dated to the fifth or sixth century. The 'basin' some 15 cm by 57cm is inscribed on one face with, on the left **שלום על ישראל ועלינו ועל בנינו ואמן** (Peace on Israel and on us and on our children, Amen) and on the right the Latin, *PAX* and *FIDES*, either side of a menorah and tree of life (?) flanked by two very crude peacocks. The first half of the Hebrew is a standard phrase in funerary inscriptions from the period but it is also the simplest form of the final benediction for peace of the *Amidah* that developed into the forms *Shalom rav* and *Sim shalom*. Elbogen quotes a version of the Amidah from the Cairo Genizah in this early simple form; **שים שלום על ישראל עמך ועל עירך** (Grant peace to Israel your people and to your city).<sup>74</sup> The second half of the phrase has been taken from the benediction after the *Shema*. The phrase has thus been formed from the culminating benedictions of the two central parts of the liturgy, the Amida and the Shema. The first is a petition for peace, the second the statement of the Jewish faith; *pax* and *fides*. Whilst the order of the two sections has been effectively reversed to create the phrase, the intention is clearly to evoke the liturgy and suggests the basin's use was liturgical rather than funerary. It also confirms that in fifth- or sixth-century Spain the Hebrew liturgy was known and used.

## 5. JEWISH LATIN LITERATURE

Whilst it has been my concern in this paper to answer Edrei and Mendels' contention that the Jews of the western Diaspora were cut off from Hebrew culture, the presence of a large Latin speaking Jewish community raises the interesting question of whether this community had its own Latin literature. We have already seen that Justinian's *novella* 146 raises the

<sup>71</sup> *Mishnah Shabbat* 6:4.

<sup>72</sup> *Interea oritur intentio inter illum et Pathiren ex Iudaeo conversum, qui iam regis filius erat ex lavacro. Cumque die sabbati Priscus praecinctus orario, nullum in manu ferens ferramentum, Moysaicas legis quasi impleturus, secretiora competiret, subito Pathir adveniens, ipsumque gladio cum sociis qui aderant iugulavit.* HF VI, 17

<sup>73</sup> *JWE* 185, 254–5.

<sup>74</sup> I. Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive Survey*, Translated by R. Scheindlin (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1993) [originally published as *Der jüdische Gottesdienst in seiner geschichtlichen Entwicklung*, 1913, 396.

possibility of a Latin ‘targum’ of Scripture, but there are other texts that have been identified as products of a Jewish Latin community; the *Collatio Legum Mosaicarum et Romanarum*, *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* and *Epistola Anne ad Senecam*.<sup>75</sup> As the *Epistola* has been the subject of my own research, I will conclude with a short discussion of this very interesting text.

In 1984 the Latin palaeographer Bernhard Bischoff published a previously overlooked manuscript from the archiepiscopal library in Cologne. The manuscript purports to be a letter from a certain Annas (presumably meant to be Annas the high priest of 5–16 CE) to the philosopher Seneca the Younger; *Epistola Anne ad Senecam de superbia et idolis*. Bischoff regards the letter as a “Jewish apologetic missionary tract” of the fourth century. Others have concurred with this interpretation.<sup>76</sup> The *Letter* has been commonly dated to the fourth century based on assumptions about the letter’s purpose. Pointing out that imperial law tried to ban Jewish missionary activities from the time of Constantine onwards, Bischoff has tentatively suggested that the letter is likely to have been composed before 325. Wischmeyer suggests that the *Letter* must predate Jerome’s translation of the Bible because the citation of Genesis 2:7 differs from Jerome’s rendering in the Vulgate. However, neither of these arguments is convincing. Firstly, there is no evidence to suggest Jews would have used Jerome’s translation, they may well have translated directly from the Greek or Hebrew or have used a Jewish Latin translation prior to Jerome’s as we have discussed above. Secondly, the text of the *Letter*, although it refers to *nostra veritas* (‘our truth’), never mentions conversion as such. Momigliano, however, proposes that Annas was an otherwise unknown Jewish propagandist not identical to Bischoff’s high priest. The name is not common among Jews of Antiquity, but a certain *didascalus* Annas is referred to twice (along with *maiores Iudaeorum*) in Late Imperial legislation on the Jews (*Codex Theodosianus* 16.9.3 (415 CE) and 16.8.23 (416 CE)).<sup>77</sup> It has been suggested that this Annas acted as a sort of Chief Rabbi of the Jews of Italy.<sup>78</sup> Though this is unsupported by any other evidence, he does seem to have represented the Jewish community to the court of Honorius at Ravenna. If there is a connection with this Annas we may have in the letter addressed to an aristocratic pagan audience Jewish participation in a Late Antique philosophical dialogue with pagan monotheism that would have certainly been congenial to the contemporary Synesius.<sup>79</sup>

It is strange that the *Letter* has remained unidentified for so long and this is surely an indication of an academic blindness that failed to identify this Jewish text as it failed to identify the Jews Golb discovered lying in plain view in the French countryside.<sup>80</sup> The

<sup>75</sup> For the *Collatio*, see Rutgers, *Jews in Late Antique Rome*, 213–18. For a consideration of the *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* as a Jewish ‘rewritten Bible’ see Tal Ilan, “The Torah of the Jews of Ancient Rome”, *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, 16/4 (2009), 363–95.

<sup>76</sup> B. Bischoff, *Ancedota Novissima. Texte des vierten bis sechzehnten Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersmann Verlag, 1984); A. Momigliano, “The New Letter by ‘Anna’ to ‘Seneca’”, *Athenaeum* 63 (1985), 217–19; L. Cracco Ruggini, “La lettera di Anna a Seneca nella Roma pagana e cristiana del IV secolo”, *Augustinianum* 28 (1988), 301–25; W. Wischmeyer, “Die Epistula Anne ad Senecam. Eine jüdische Missionsschrift des Lateinischen Bereichs”, in J. van Amersfoort and J. van Oort, eds., *Juden und Christen in der Antike* (1991), 72–93. See also A.C. Sterk “The Letter of Annas to Seneca: a Late Antique Jewish Exhortation in Dialogue with Roman Paganism”, in S. Pearce, ed., *The Image and the Prohibition of the Image in Ancient Judaism* (*Journal of Jewish Studies Supplement Series* 2, Oxford, 2012), 170–81, and *The Epistola Anne ad Senecam in its Historical and Literary Context* (PhD Thesis, forthcoming).

<sup>77</sup> A. Linder, *Jews in Roman Imperial Legislation*, 273–6.

<sup>78</sup> C. Vogler, “Les Juifs dans le Code Théodosien”, *Le plan théologique* 32 (1979), 35–74.

<sup>79</sup> For late pagan monotheism, see P. Athanassiadi and M. Frede, eds., *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>80</sup> An example of how Jews may have been overlooked in the archaeological record is given in the Appendix.

assumption remains that Jews constituted an insignificant community in the Latin west after the establishment of Christianity in the fourth century and remained such until the large-scale immigration of Jews from the South via Italy beginning in the ninth century. But much to the contrary we see that the Jewish communities of the western Diaspora remained a significant and vital part of western society whilst maintaining a strong and evolving connection with their Jewish and Hebrew traditions. The Jewish cultures of Ashkenaz and Sepharad, Rome and southern Italy (and *a fortiori* that of Byzantine Greece) were not alien imports into medieval Europe, but rather they grew organically from indigenous Romaniote communities with their roots deep in the Latino-Romance soil, kept vital by their continuing connection to the Hebrew Levant.

## 6. CONCLUSION

As I outlined at the beginning of this paper the historiography of this period has on the whole assumed that the period saw a wholesale retreat from the cities and that Jewish communities being urban followed suit, but the evidence now seems to indicate that there was both an unexpectedly widespread presence of rural Jews and a continuity of life in the cities and towns. The evidence I have presented also shows that western Jews maintained and indeed deepened their reliance on Hebrew culture and learning. The Jewish communities of western Europe, in lasting and frequent communication with Palestine, maintained a Hebrew-centred identity and culture that developed naturally through the period from a 'normal' Judaism to rabbinic 'normative' Judaism as developments in Liturgy and *Halakhah* filtered through to the West. Whilst the observance of many Jews in the west may have been no more strict than the *'ammei ha'ares* ('people of the land', 'the common people') so despised by the Rabbis of the Talmud it was a normal Judaism. There is absolutely no evidence that an abnormal 'biblical' Judaism existed in the west or that western rabbis had to combat such a 'karaitisant' heresy. The learned leaders of the community no doubt were instrumental in overseeing the development of everyday observance into 'normative' Judaism as the community became both more self-consciously Jewish *vis-à-vis* the Christian community and increasingly needed to rely on its own cultural resources as it became isolated from the wider community.

As Fergus Millar says, until now 'the social, intellectual, and religious history of these Jews in the Latin-speaking environment of the western half of the later Roman Empire remains a largely unexplored field.'<sup>81</sup> This present paper is more suggestive than comprehensive in its treatment of the evidence for these continuing Jewish communities, but it is to be hoped that future studies will look beyond the limited textual evidence to other sources (archaeological, linguistic, etc.) and begin to ask what might be the consequences to the "formation of Europe" of a significant Jewish Latino-Romaniote community in the Latin West surviving from late Antiquity into the Middle Age; the demographic and cultural substratum that lay beneath both Sepharad and Ashkenaz.

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<sup>81</sup> F. Millar, "The Jews of the Graeco-Roman Diaspora" in H.M. Cotton and G.M. Rogers, eds., *Rome, The Greek World, and the East*, 3 vols (2006), vol. 3, 435.

7. APPENDIX – THE ‘CHURCH’ AT SILCHESTER<sup>82</sup>

The town of Silchester (*Calleva Atrebatum* – the *civitas* capital of the Atrebates tribe) was established by the Romans in the first century CE. It is unusual in that the site was abandoned some time in the mid-fifth century during the anarchy following the withdrawal of imperial authority from Britain by Honorius in 410 and remained unbuilt on apart from a church by the site of the east gate of the town. The town was excavated at the end of the nineteenth century by the London Society of Antiquaries who in a twenty year period from 1890 to 1909 exposed the whole area. Unfortunately this has meant that much material which would have provided important clues about the presence of wooden buildings that would have been revealed by modern techniques was also removed.

In the *insula* immediately to the south of the Forum complex a small apsed basilican building with possibly a courtyard in front was discovered in the 1892 excavations which was immediately identified as a Romano-British church, evidently the first to be discovered in Britain. The building is 10 metres in length and 8.91 metres in width. The western third of both aisles is extended slightly to form two 7 metre square ‘transepts’ on either side of the apse. The remains of a mosaic was centrally placed in front of the apse. The building is in fact quite small, one in which a ‘congregation of fifty would have been uncomfortably crowded’.<sup>83</sup> The building is described by John Ward in his *The Roman Era in Britain* of 1911 as follows:

The only undoubted remains of a Christian church as yet known in this country were uncovered at Silchester in 1892, but as unfortunately they were very scanty, little remaining above the floor-level, the plan, [see fig. 2], is necessarily imperfect. The church was a small structure, only 42 ft. long and 27 ft. wide; nevertheless, the plan exhibits all the chief features of a typical early Christian basilica. Its orientation, as in many early Italian churches, was the reverse of the present custom, the chancel being to the west. It was entered through an internal porch or narthex, at the east end, and was divided into a nave and two aisles by arcades of which the sleeper-walls remain. Two transepts – the *prothesis* and *diaconicum* of early Christian writers – were apparently screened off from the aisles, but open to the western prolongation of the nave. The floor was of mosaic, and where the holy table stood was a decorated panel of finer work. The building stood in an oblong space, in which, in front of the narthex, was a square foundation which presumably supported the *cantharus* [holy water font], and at its side a small pit, which probably received the waste water.

This identification has generally been accepted. There are, however, a number of problems with this. Firstly, for a church to be placed so prominently near to the administrative centre of the town would mean that it was built after 313 when Christianity finally became a recognised *religio licita*. It is extremely unlikely that a proscribed religious group would be allowed to build so close to the centre of the imperial administration and cult. Secondly, the description given above (and which has been generally accepted since) projects onto the building a pattern of liturgical design and practice that does not become normal until the sixth century and even then only in the Byzantine east. Thirdly, if the building is post-313, it is a pretty poor representation of the now imperially favoured religion. One would hardly

<sup>82</sup> The following appendix is something of a thought experiment exploring the possibility of looking at such remains ‘Jewishly’. I intend to look at the Silchester ‘synagogue’ in more detail in a future article.

<sup>83</sup> M.E. Jones, *The End of Roman Britain* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1998), 176.

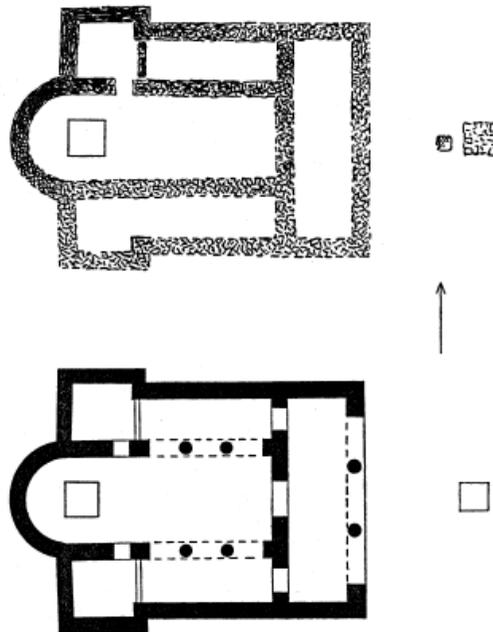


Fig 2. Plan of Church, Silchester, and Conjectural Restoration (J. Ward, *The Roman Era in Britain*, 1911)

expect the great Constantinian basilicas like those of Trier and St Peter in this small provincial town, but certainly something a little more impressive. That the building is a church has been questioned by King<sup>84</sup> who determined that ‘the best possibility of its use was for an eastern cult’ but he declined to say which cult he might have had in mind. Oddly, although King quotes Frere as saying; ‘Since, *apart from synagogues* (my emphasis), there are no examples of non-Christian shrines of appropriate date aping so closely the architectural arrangement of a Christian place of worship,’ he nevertheless does not in his paper consider this possibility. King compares the layout of the Silchester building to those of *scholae*, the meeting houses of Roman funeral and religious *collegia*, such as the Schola of the Nautae, Aventicum (Avenches, Switzerland).<sup>85</sup> The comparison is very apposite as the *collegia* would have provided the legal framework for Jewish (and Christian) communities in the empire, and it is probably not a coincidence that Latin *schola* provides the word for synagogue in the Judeo-Romance languages; Yiddish, *shul*, Judeo-slavic *škola*, Italian *escuela*.

In 2004 Stephen Cosh re-examined the only evidence in the building that is possibly dateable, the mosaic in front of the apse (see fig. 3). Comparing this to very similar mosaics elsewhere in Britain, in Leicester, Gloucester, Wroxeter and Canterbury that are more precisely dated, he concluded that the building would have to have a terminus post quem of the late second century and can probably be dated to the late second or early third century, a date far too early to make it a church.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>84</sup> A. King, “The Roman Church at Silchester Reconsidered”, *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 2 (1983), 225–37.

<sup>85</sup> E. Thomas, *Monumentality and the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 123.

<sup>86</sup> S.R. Cosh, “A Possible Date for the Silchester ‘Church’”, *Britannia* 35 (2004), 229–33.

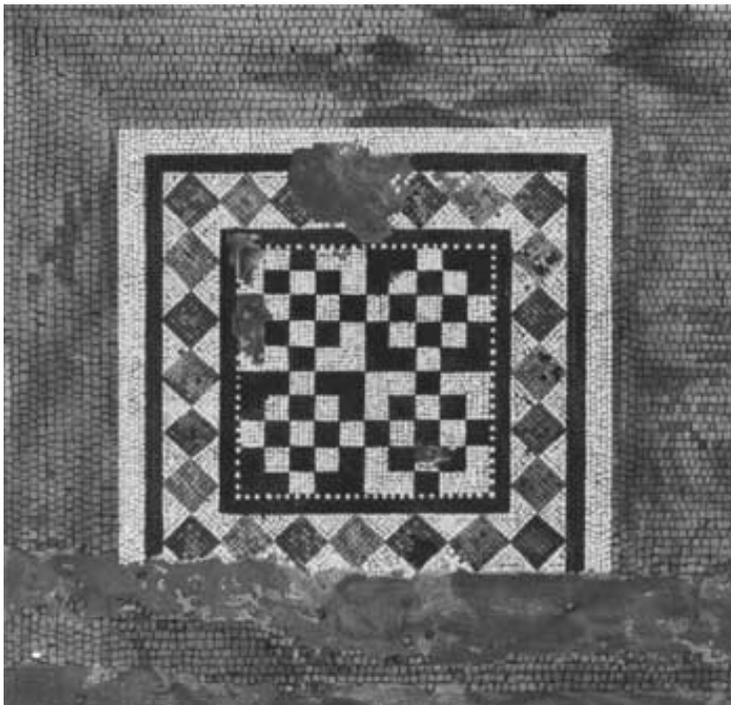


Fig 3. The Silchester "Church" and Apse Mosaic in 1961 University of Reading, Silchester Insula IX (image previously available on website: [www.rdg.ac.uk/AcaDepts/la/silchester/publish/guide/public.php](http://www.rdg.ac.uk/AcaDepts/la/silchester/publish/guide/public.php))

If the building is not a church the question arises could it possibly be a synagogue? The assumption has been that Jewish communities were not present in Roman Britain, but it is not inherently impossible. We certainly have evidence of one near-eastern artisan Barates, a *vexillarius* (flag maker) from Palmyra, who settled in Wallsend in Northumbria, married a local British woman and had his grief at her death recorded on her tombstone in Aramaic. Also, judging by his name, the martyr Aaron of Caerwent who allegedly died in the Diocletianic persecutions may have come from a Jewish-Christian background. Given the evidence we have presented for extensive Jewish settlement in Northern Gaul, however, it would be surprising if there were not similar settlements in southern Britain. Silchester certainly had a number of foreign artisans as a *collegia peregrinorum* (guild of foreigners) was found to the east of the 'church' building.

Levine gives a number of criteria by which a synagogue might be identified: all or part of the following; Jewish symbols (e.g. the menorah), inscriptions mentioning the term 'synagogue', names of officials generally associated with this institution, distinctive personal names, the internal orientation of columns and/or benches towards Jerusalem, and the presence of a *bimah*, niche, or *aedicula* along the Jerusalem-oriented wall. Like many other public buildings a synagogue building might include a courtyard, entrances, a main hall with benches, columns, and often a series of ancillary rooms.<sup>87</sup>

Clearly there is no epigraphic evidence that would firmly establish the use of this building, but each of the other elements can be discerned. The platform to the east of the entrance would have formed the base of a fountain central to an *atrium* filling the space between the building and the *cardo* (main street). Such an atrium is common on Roman basilicas and can be seen both on the original plan of the St Peter's in Rome and the contemporary synagogue of Sardis. Indeed the whole building parallels that of Sardis, albeit it on a much humbler (and more characteristically smaller) scale. The mosaic in the centre of the apse is in the same location as the table at Sardis and may possibly have served as the location on which a portable ark could be placed. When not in use the Torah scrolls and the ark itself could have been kept either in an *aedicula* at the west (Jerusalem) end; this may have been the reason for the base found in the north of the narthex (see fig. 2). Alternatively the northern transept may have been used as a store for the scrolls and other *instrumenta*, as in the synagogue at Naro.<sup>88</sup> The northern transept may alternatively have served as a communal treasury. The orientation with the entrance towards Jerusalem is common in early synagogues (cf. Sardis again). The orientation of prayer would be to the east wall or even to the windows in the east wall in accordance with the prayer of Daniel, who prayed towards Jerusalem through an open window (Dan. 6:11).

It is impossible on the evidence we have to establish that the building *was* a synagogue, it may have served another purpose entirely, but, given the date and location<sup>89</sup> of the building, if the building had a religious function then it is actually more probable that it was a synagogue rather than the accepted identification as a church. Needless to say this does not indicate that a Jewish community survived in Britain beyond the fifth century. It does

<sup>87</sup> L. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue* (New York and London: Yale University Press, 2005), 313.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

<sup>89</sup> Golb locates the medieval *vicus Judaeorum*, the centre of the Jewish communities of Rothomagus (Rouen) and Reims in a similar area close to the Forum between the *decumanus* and *cardo*. See *Jews in Medieval Normandy* (1998), 34–6.

however indicate how evidence in western Europe might be reassessed if the possibility of extensive Jewish settlements is allowed for. At Silchester we may be fortunate that the abandonment of the town has meant the building escaped Christian destruction or appropriation. Perhaps other ancient churches situated in the *enceintes* of Roman towns, like St Paul-in-the-Bail, Lincoln or St Pancras, Exeter or even Bede's "building of antiquity" that so readily served as a chapel for the Christian, Frankish queen Bertha, consort of the pagan King Ethelbert of Kent, might be similarly reassessed.

## ABBREVIATIONS

- CCSL* *Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina*. (Turnhout: Brepols, 1953–)
- JWE* D. Noy, *Jewish Inscriptions in Western Europe: vol. 1, Italy (excluding Rome), Spain and Gaul; vol. 2, The City of Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 1995).
- MGH* W. Arndt and Bruno Krusch, eds., *Monumenta Germaniae Historica; scriptores rerum Merovingicarum*, vol. 1 (Hanover, 1885; repr. 1961).
- PL* J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina. Patrologiae cursus completus; series latina* (1844–55).

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