Preface

The present volume is the thirteenth in my Documentary History of the Jews in Italy, and the first of the Jews in Sicily, covering the years 383–1300. It also represents volume 115 of the Publications of the Diaspora Research Institute, The School of Jewish Studies, Tel Aviv University. It is to be followed by several volumes covering the 14th and 15th centuries, up to the expulsion of the Jews from Sicily. The method employed is once again that applied to Milan, Piedmont, and Umbria, and not the one used in regard to the Jews in Rome. The vagaries of the survival of historical records have distorted the quantitative presentation of the documents. For the first thousand years of Sicilian Jewish history we possess only a fraction of the documentation which we are fortunate to have for the last two centuries of the Jewish presence on the island. Even for that latter period the documentation is not evenly spaced out, and the last fifty years of the fifteenth century have provided us with the vast majority of surviving records.

The periods covered by the present volume include Antiquity, the rule in Sicily of Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, Hohenstaufen, Angevins, and the Aragonese conquest of the island. Until the discovery of the Cairo Geniza very little information on the Jewish presence in Sicily before the twelfth century had come to light. Little has changed in this respect over the years, except in regard to the Geniza letters. There are also several epitaphs, some letters by Pope Gregory I, and a few references to Jews in other sources. All the same it would appear that Jews lived continuously in Sicily throughout that period, although there is no telling as yet in what numbers. The Cairo documents changed all that, especially in respect to the first half of the eleventh century. Half or so of the documents contained in the present volume are culled from this unexpected windfall of historical records shedding light on a period hitherto shrouded in almost total obscurity and adding useful information also on the Norman era. For the latter and for the two centuries up to the Aragonese conquest we put together (hopefully) all known documents on the Jews of Sicily.
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stemming from those times, including a few which have only recently been discovered.

For the most part, hitherto the Cairo letters have only been available to scholars in Judeo-Arabic and Hebrew. The present volume aims at correcting that situation. In translating the texts into English, we have in the main followed the readings of Gil and given them preference over those of Goitein and Ben-Menahem. Even so, many doubtful readings remain, and lacunae in the original letters could not be filled. Unfortunately that still leaves us with many unsolved problems.

As usual, the documents are preceded by an introduction in which I outline the history of the Jews in Sicily from Antiquity to the Aragonese conquest. The documents have been furnished with summaries and references, thus providing (hopefully) a useful tool for further research into the history of the Jews on the island. There are also a bibliography, a list of sources and abbreviations, a glossary, and indexes.

I should like to thank all those who made the preparation and publication of this volume possible.

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