CHAPTER TWO

ITALY

Italy in the Early Middle Ages was not one political, ethnic, or cultural unit. Between the 6th and the 11th centuries, its different parts were under the rule of at least five entities that usually fought, coexisted uneasily over periods, and at times vanquished each other: Ostrogoths, Byzantines, Langobards, Carolingian Franks, and Arabs.\(^1\) In the later part of the period city-states came into being, and at its very end powerful new players, the Normans, arrived on the scene. The latter succeeded where everyone else had failed, uniting the south and even adding to their dominion Sicily, which had been under Arab rule since the 9th century. In a process that began as early as the 5th century, the northern/central interior and the coastal regions of the peninsula separated into two different entities, the “two Italies”.\(^2\) This also decisively shaped the history of Jews, warranting a separate treatment of northern and central Italy on one hand, and of the south on the other. The city of Rome occupied an in-between position and stands out for its unbroken continuity of Jewish existence. In this changing political landscape Byzantium remained a constant actor, even though the territorial extent of her Italian dominion underwent considerable changes. Expelled from the north and center of the country, the Empire hung on to large parts of the south where most of Italy’s Jews lived, even extending and buttressing its rule in the 10th to 11th centuries.\(^3\) Many scholars have thus viewed the influence of Byzantium as paramount for southern Italian Jewry, and discuss the latter as part of the former.\(^4\) In this book, southern Italy is treated as part of an Italian story rather than of the Byzantine one, a decision suggested by the moving borders of

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4 For instance Zimmels, 1966, Sharf, 1971, and especially Starr, 1939, who presents the southern Italian sources as integral part of the Byzantine documentation. I too have expressed something close to this view in Toch, 2005: 549.
Byzantine dominion, the existence of Jewish communities in numerous non-Byzantine places of the South, and the decidedly local character of Jewish economic activity.

The evidence extant from Italy is of a somewhat different nature than in Byzantium or, as we shall see, in Frankish Europe or Spain. After the Patristic period of Late Antiquity, hagiography and religious polemics become less prominent, except for Byzantine Sicily where they abound. Instead, to a degree undreamt of in any other country, there are charters and notarial records, types of sources that give matter-of-fact information on real people. The present chapter, as the preceding and following ones, opens with demographics, and then moves to economics. It too stops with the later 12th century evidence provided by the traveler Benjamin of Tudela.

People and Communities

As elsewhere, the demographic profile and development of Italian Jews must be seen in the context of their environment. As has been stated on strength of the archaeological record,

At the end of the Roman period (in particular in the 6th and 7th centuries) the towns of northern Italy suffered considerable decline. Many towns disappeared altogether, and those that survived shrank in population and density of settlement. However, despite considerable decline, towns in this period perhaps fared better in Italy than they did in most other parts of the former Empire. A large number did survive, and the evidence shows some continuity of occupation and of urban sophistication. Towns survived because they continued to serve as centres for the administration, as a home for the aristocracy and, to some extent, as centres of production and exchange. In the 8th and 9th centuries, as elsewhere, urban life revived. In Italy the revival was particularly widespread and dramatic, probably because the towns had not suffered quite the same decline as they had elsewhere.

Our review of the late antique sources has found a clear preponderance of the south, with a total of 32 places of Jewish habitation in evidence, as compared to the north and center (including Rome) with a mere nine-

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