Chapter four

The Iberian Peninsula

Iberia (today’s Spain and Portugal) experienced severe political upheavals during the early medieval period, and beyond.1 By the early decades of the 5th century, the Roman provinces of Hispania were steadily inundated by bands of Germanic warriors—Vandals, Sueves, Alans, and since the mid-century Visigoths. Towards the end of the century the Visigoths completed their conquest of Roman Hispania. In the early decades of the 6th century they lost to the Franks their territory across the Pyrenees in Gaul, except for Septimania. In mid-century the Byzantines occupied parts of the south-eastern coastline around Cartagena, to be expelled ultimately only some seventy years later. In 585, an invigorated Visigoth monarchy put an end to the Germanic kingdom of the Sueves in the north-west of the peninsula. Shortly afterwards, in 589, the Third Church Council at the capital of Toledo marked the conversion from Arian Christianity to Catholicism, a step fraught with significance for Iberian Jewry. The Arab invasion of 711 did away with the Visigoth kingdom and led by 756 to the establishment of the powerful Omayyad Emirate (since 929 Caliphate) of al-Andalus, with its capital at Córdoba. Only a small part of the peninsula remained under Christian control. In the course of the 8th century the Franks under the Carolingian dynasty frequently intervened in north-eastern Spain, leading in 801 to the conquest of Barcelona and subsequently to the establishment of the “Spanish March”. By the early 11th century the Muslim Caliphate was disintegrating into numerous principalities, the so-called Taifa (party) states, while the Christian realms in the north gathered strength for the onset of Reconquista later in the century. Their advance was however slowed and then brought to a standstill by invasions of Berber tribes under the leadership of two subsequent dynasties, the Almoravids (1086/1090) and the Almohads (1170). Only by the early 13th century was the Christian re-conquest geared to gather new and decisive force.

People and Communities

In order to establish when and where Jews lived in the Iberian Peninsula, we shall look at the Roman, Visigothic, and Muslim periods, in the latter also at developments in the Christian north. Where possible, we shall be attentive to distribution across space and to regional patterns. Again, we shall ask how many people, even though a definite answer is almost impossible. The starting point is the undoubted presence of Jews in Roman Hispania, for which some scholars tend to posit an early date, sometimes in the 1st to 3rd centuries. However, unequivocal evidence comes mostly from Late Antiquity, the 4th to 6th centuries. This includes, in approximate chronological and geographic order: Latin and/or Greek and Hebrew epitaphs and inscriptions from Villamesias, Mérida, Adra, Mértola and Tortosa; from Tarragona, Roman provincial capital and harbor on the Mediterranean coast, the only place with more than a single archaeological find and thus clearly one of substantial Jewish population; the remains of a synagogue or assembly hall at Elche; and three lead sheets bearing a Hebrew name from Santa María del Camí near Palma on the island of Mallorca.

Further clues to the whereabouts of Jews in late-Roman Iberia have been drawn from the decisions of a church council convened around the year 306 in the town of Elvira (Roman Illiberis, very near Granada if not actually identical with it). Of its eighty one canons, four aimed to limit social contacts with Jews. These were indeed the earliest pronouncement of any church synod directed against the Jews. We have had plenty opportunity to see that in other places such deliberations did not necessarily stem from actual encounters or experiences with Jews. Furthermore, the synodal character and extent of jurisdiction of the Elvira meeting are far from being agreed upon in scholarship. It thus seems excessive to conclude from these canons that “Christian communities and a conspicuous, well-established Jewish population with its flourishing religious traditions were co-existing on the Iberian Peninsula”. At most, one might take them to impart that “about the year 300 we find proof of a group of Jews in the south of Spain, in the region of what is today Granada”.

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