Population numbers and distribution are a critical factor in a realistic appreciation of the weight and role of Jews in the economies of Europe. There can be no doubt that in Late Antiquity some groups in Southern Europe—in Italy and Byzantium—were quite substantial, even though the millions proffered in scholarship do not stand up to scrutiny. Our investigation too has turned up no indications for such extensive figures. In other parts, Spain and southern Gaul, much smaller numbers were present, while northern Gaul had few and the Roman parts of Germany no Jews except for some itinerant merchants or craftsmen. The administrative center of Trier might have been an exception, and the same has been alleged for Cologne. Along the Danube border in Eastern Austria and Hungary more Jews were present, in some places amounting to synagogue communities, and the same holds for the Black Sea shores and the Crimea. In Eastern Europe proper as in Germany beyond the Roman border, no evidence for an antique Jewish presence however slight has been found. Not surprisingly, such existence was confined to the urban landscape of the Roman world, in its Western and even more in its Eastern parts.

In the first centuries of the Middle Ages, Jewish life continued on a diminished scale in the Byzantine Empire. Elsewhere the evidence dwindles to almost nothing, except for a few places in Italy and Southern France. In Visigothic Spain, clear indications for a spare Jewish population—the total absence of archaeological finds and of evidence produced by Jews themselves—are difficult to square with the spate of repressive legislation enacted by the Visigothic monarchy and church after the conversion to Catholicism. In a similar way, in northern and central Gaul our investigation has raised doubts whether the literature of the Church can provide confirmation for actually existing Jews, rather than for virtual ones serving a polemical or rhetorical purpose. Everywhere, indicators point to a severely restricted Jewish population, although to different degrees in different regions. Mention should be made once more of the intriguing hypothesis by Edrei and Mendels on a linguistic-cultural
separation that developed in Late Antiquity between Eastern Rabbinical and Western Biblical Judaism. In this process, the Western Diaspora was left without ties to the new centers of Judaism in the Middle East, and might as a consequence have largely assimilated into the Christian community. This would explain, complementary to our environmental thesis developed below, the unmistakable demographic decline of the late antique Mediterranean Diaspora. It would also explain the clean slate for the renewed build-up of the medieval European Jewish population which was to exhibit a very different cultural and linguistic profile, of a Hebrew-Aramaic writing Rabbinical Judaism clearly nourished from Mid-Eastern—Babylonian and Palestinian—sources.

By the 9th/10th century this new growth, slow at first and then accelerating, becomes visible everywhere. In Spain and possibly also in Sicily, it is clearly tied to the more favourable Arab regime, to immigration from North Africa and to new links forged with the mid-Eastern centres of Jewish learning. In Italy and southern France the sources for growth are still obscure, but trends are similar. In central and northern Gaul and western Germany, the Jewish presence was a new phenomenon wholly dependent on immigration from the south. From there it drew demographic and cultural resources, to be transmitted and transformed with a time lag to the north. Save for the enigmatic Khazar entity whose Jewish character is much in doubt and which completely disappeared from the stage, Jewish population in Eastern Europe began its growth at the very end of the period under consideration. By this time, the 11th century, both northern and southern Jewries had come of age: part of the European landscape; strong enough to claim their intellectual independence from the centres of religious authority in the Middle East; equipped with ready legal procedures to navigate a range of economic pursuits that were very different from the antique ones. In this and many other senses, the medieval Jewries of Europe represent a rupture, a new phenomenon quite dissimilar to the Greek-speaking Mediterranean Diaspora of Late Antiquity.

How does the Jewish population curve speak to the general one? The proto-Byzantine world knew demographic growth until the plague epidemic of 541/542 and economic growth up to around the year 550. Then a decline set in, gradually till 615/620 (the Persian invasion of Asia Minor), accelerating to 636 (the disastrous battle of Yarmouk against the Arabs).

2 Simonsohn, 1974.