Introduction: Sources and Methodology

More than half a century has passed since the appearance of the two comprehensive monographs on the History of the Jews of Italy by Cecil Roth and Attilio Milano respectively. Since then more than 10,000 books and articles on the Jews of the Apennine Peninsula in the Middle Ages and Modern Times have been published, and another several thousand publications on these Jews in Antiquity have issued from the printers’ presses. It is therefore probably about time that a new analysis and assessment of that history is attempted. The results of the research as portrayed in these publications have made it possible to investigate new aspects and concepts, as well as fresh approaches and insights. Whether in the end this will change our view of Italian Jews throughout the ages or not remains to be seen. The reader shall judge and decide.

The present volume is the first of several on the history of the Jews of Italy, from Antiquity to the present. Considering my advanced years, I may not be able to bring my effort to a successful conclusion, but that shall not be for want of trying. I shall exploit to the full a life-long involvement in the research of this section of the Jewish people in the Diaspora, one of the few enjoying an uninterrupted history spanning over 2,000 years. Evidently, the sources for Antiquity, the first period in sequence, differ in many ways from those of subsequent ages. Hence also their use and exploitation for illuminating the period to which they refer are at variance with the rest. The sources are archaeological, literary,
legal and assorted lesser ones which do not fit into one of the larger groups. They are Jewish and non-Jewish, pagan and Christian, Roman and Greek and again a few others. The archaeological ones range from a few buildings, chiefly synagogues, or rather their remnants, including some of their inscriptions, to cemeteries, mainly catacombs and their epitaphs and inscriptions; the literary output of Greeks, Romans and Jews, in their several languages; as well as the legislation and other legal texts formulated by the Roman authorities and by the rabbis, the latter mostly in Judaea and Babylonia, although a few Italian ones too have survived. Standing out by their absence are archival documents, which are an essential cornerstone for the reconstruction of the past in the Middle Ages and Modern Times and which hitherto served me in my research into the history of the Jews in Italy. So that being the case new sources for Antiquity shine by their absence while the reliability of those still available is often blighted by their dubious nature.

Like all historians, past and present, I cannot escape myself and my times, nor do I wish to. However, thereby I do not mean that I am slavishly bound to an agenda, political, social, religious and otherwise. I seek the truth, elusive as it may be, and if it escapes me it is not for want of trying. I rather prefer to walk in the footsteps of Thucydides as well as those of Herodotus, since fables also have their use. In short, outmoded as many of my contemporaries make him, my model is Leopold v. Ranke; and if Ranke will not do, another is Benedetto Croce. Hence it will not come as a surprise that I am no kin to post-modernists and other "progressives" and "revisionists". The widening of the scope of historiography from "preoccupation with the elites" to a "total history" does not affect this principle. At the same time I am not blind to the fact that many years have passed since the days of these luminaries, and that new aspects and insights have come to the fore. Some have come to stay, at least for a while, while others are temporary and will vanish sooner or later.3

The value of these sources for the Jews of Italy in Antiquity as historical evidence is uneven. There is not a single detail beyond dispute. This is partly due to the large degree of their unreliability, and partly to an untrammelled passion

---

3 Ranke: "Man hat der Historie das Amt die Vergangenheit zu richten, die Mitwelt zum Nutzen zukünftiger Jahre zu bekehren, beigemessen: so hoher Aemter unterwindet sich gegenwärtiger Versuch nicht: er will blos zeigen wie es eigentlich gewesen". This passage is being misinterpreted more often than not [roughly translated: . . . History has been attributed the function of judging the past, to convert the world to the advantage of the future: to such high offices this work does not aspire: It wants only to show what really was] (Sämtliche Werke, vol. 33/34, p. 7). And see his The Theory and Practice of History, passim. His chief critique was Carr, What is History? passim. Others followed suit. Not surprisingly these views were rejected in turn. Croce on history: "Every history is contemporary history" (Teoria e storia della historiografia, passim [Engl. Ed.: History: Its Theory and Practice, passim]).