CHAPTER ONE

TOWARD A CULTURAL HISTORY OF JEWISH POPULATIONS IN ROMAN NORTH AFRICA

An investigation into the history of Jews of Roman North Africa would immediately reveal its three disparate features. The first of these is the obscurity of the topic. A proper scholarly treatment of the group has never been conducted. Material evidence for Jews of ancient North Africa, unlike for those who populated Asia Minor and Europe, has eluded modern scholarly examination. Epigraphic evidence for this population was marginalized at an early stage: Jean Baptiste Frey died before he was able to compile the corpus of North African regional inscriptions in a manner comparable to his treatment of their European counterparts. Shimon Applebaum and Victor Tcherikover thoroughly investigated neighboring Jewish communities in ancient Cyrene and Egypt, but their studies halted at the borders of the western Roman African provinces. Broader studies of Mediterranean Judaism have, in turn, neglected this group: in his work on *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan (332–117 B.C.E.),* John Barclay does not even mention Jews in North Africa outside of Egypt, while in her compendium on *The Jews under Roman Rule,* Mary Smallwood mentions Jews from the region only in passing.

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1 The absence of more specific studies on North African materials has particularly kept inscriptions and archaeology of this region out of the limelight. Frey’s collection of Jewish inscriptions of Western Europe (*CIJ*) has facilitated countless studies of previously neglected ancient Jewish populations. The absence of a collection of North African materials eliminated scholars’ easy access to and specific review of North African Jewish inscriptions specifically. No subsequent scholars have undertaken a more substantial study of the evidence for this population, which requires more thorough treatment than that possible within a chapter or an article.

2 Smallwood notes the existence of inscriptions found in Rome (*CIJ* 390, 408) which commemorate synagogues with members from Tripoli (1981, 251). It remains unclear which ancient Tripoli these references intend (whether along the eastern or southern Mediterranean coast). The editors of Schürer’s *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ* similarly devote only two pages to summarizing some of the archaeological and epigraphic evidence for Jews from this region (Schürer 1986, III.1, 64).
A second trend is a focus on origins. Isolated studies of Jewish archaeological finds have addressed the lineages of North African Jews and have emphasized a strong relationship between these Jewish populations and their origins. To Père Delattre, Carthaginian Jews were actually Jewish Christians who had traveled to North Africa directly from the Holy Land, just after the death of Christ himself. These bearers of the “good news” had established the earliest Jewish Christian communities on the African continent. Alternatively, to H.Z. Hirschberg and Marcel Simon, this same group had come directly from ancient Israel after the destruction of the first temple: these Jews had founded the beginnings of Sephardic Jewish traditions in North Africa, which ultimately extended to the present day. To Yann Le Bohec, on the other hand, these groups were definitively Roman Palestinian and rabbinic. The alignment of Carthaginian Jews’ funerary architecture with the prescriptions for underground burial in Babylonian rabbinic texts, Le Bohec thought, was sufficient evidence to characterize as “Talmudic” an entire Jewish necropolis and the historical population that buried there (Le Bohec 1981a). In these cases, the Jews’ posited Palestinian origins and Talmudic practices are elided—such classifications for the group are considered nearly synonymous (Delattre 1895; Le Bohec 1981, 165; Rives 1995, 215–218).

One last tendency within scholarship of African Jews is found within studies related to North African Christian writings and legal codes. Scholars of early Latin Christianity have shown particular interest in this group; they reconsider evidence for North African Jews and participate in passionate debates about Jews’ relationships to contemporaneous Christians. Earlier studies by W.H.C. Frend describe accounts of extensive antipathy between Jewish and Christian communities as real, because, as Tertullian had implied, Jews were committed adversaries of North African Christian groups (Scorp. X; Frend 1970). Charles Bobertz and Paula Fredriksen have proposed differing readings of such texts; they suggest that the relationships between Jewish and Christian communities may have been less acrimonious than some Christian writers initially seemed to indicate (Bobertz 1991; Fredriksen 1995). Literary and archaeological evidence for Jewish and Christian groups suggests to Claudia Setzer a more wide-ranging set of relationships; she argues that North African Jews may have maintained idiosyncratic