CHAPTER TWO

LOCATING JEWS IN A NORTH AFRICAN WORLD

What is the most accurate description of a North African from the Roman period? Was he a dweller of the high steppe who exclusively spoke his tribal dialect and whose ancestors had traversed the Sahara’s periphery for centuries? Was she an Egyptian slave, who spoke Greek and was purchased in an *emporium* in the Tripolitanian east to serve local, Punic-speaking elites of Levantine descent? Was he a Palmyrene-speaking soldier from Tadmor, Syria, whose legion the Romans had positioned to monitor Africa’s Mauretanian borders? Was he a man of Libyan descent, who spoke Libyan dialects, worshipped his ancestors, and called himself a Christian? Or was she, perhaps, an urban-dwelling, Latin-speaking, Numidian Jew, whose grandfather had traveled to Africa from Puteoli? Each of these individuals could be characterized as an inhabitant of North Africa and thereby, as North African. Their descriptions, however, exemplify how variable were the origins and socio-economic status, as well as the linguistic and cultic practices of North Africans throughout proximate regions and times. From the eighth century B.C.E., through the first Arab conquest in the seventh century C.E., North Africans’ most common features were the variety of their origins and their cultural identities. Individual North African populations require evaluation within this composite demographic and cultural context.

In this chapter, I argue that the constellation of ethnic, linguistic, and cultic practices associated with North African populations varied enormously throughout North Africa in the second through sixth centuries C.E. Tribal migrations, trade, and conquest periodically precipitated demographic fluctuations throughout the region and forged inextricable links between North Africans’ cultural identities and those of their neighbors, their colonizers, and their conquerors. Cultural histories of individual North African populations, including Jews, require examination according to these regional dynamics of demography and culture: the complexities of North African and Jewish cultural identities appear thoroughly interconnected with the broader complexities of North African culture at large.
Contingencies of Mediterranean history suggest initial reasons for North Africa’s demographic and cultural diversity. First, unlike most eastern Mediterranean regions, North Africa had remained impervious to the immediate cultural repercussions of the conquests of Alexander the Great—Alexander’s troops had halted at Africa’s eastern Libyan and Egyptian borders. While certain Tripolitanian cities, Punic *emporia*, and Numidian regions that maintained contacts with Hellenistic traders exhibited some cultural features of the Hellenistic east, North Africa’s experience of Hellenization remained only sporadic and regionally determined. The Greek language and Hellenistic cults never gained the widespread popularity in North Africa that they had attained throughout the eastern Mediterranean.

Second, North Africa’s transformation under Roman rule also differed from that of Rome’s other western provinces. Centuries of indigenous and exogenous populations’ migrations throughout North Africa shaped the region’s variable demographic distribution. Continuous movements of nomadic-sedentarist tribes precipitated population fluctuations in the region’s interior. Phoenician traders from the Levant had founded flourishing *emporia* along North Africa’s coasts that subsequently attracted Greek-speaking merchants from throughout the Mediterranean. Rome’s military, economic, and cultural infiltration of North Africa facilitated the immigration of Syrians, Spaniards, Egyptians, Macedonians, Noricans, Gauls, Jews, and others from Roman-conquered territories by the second century C.E. Subsequent invasions of Vandal and Byzantine troops additionally complicated North Africa’s demographic composition. Continuous patterns of migration, trade, and conquest, therefore, had forged a substantively composite cultural environment in Roman North Africa.

Rome had introduced its military, languages, and cult into North Africa just as it had into other Roman provinces, such as Britain, Gaul, and Germany (Derks 1998; Woolf 1994), but North Africa’s particularly composite demography and culture responded idiosyncratically to the cultural forces of the empire. Despite the high degree of connectivity in the Roman Empire, North Africa’s varied history of population migration and conquest ensured discrepancies between Africa’s and other western provinces' reactions to hegemonic cultures in the late ancient Mediterranean. North Africa’s cultural climate developed distinctly from that in other regions of the Hellenistic and Roman Mediterranean world.