II. CONTACT THROUGH SOCIETY
The Jews and the Origins of Romance Script in Castile: A New Paradigm

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Abstract
Languages define cultures, and languages are defined by the way in which they are written down. Christian, Jewish and Muslim speakers of Spanish, in its early Castilian form, only began to develop their own written code in the final decades of the twelfth century. Their efforts did not follow the organic, evolutionary model that may be applied to oral linguistic change. Instead, they were shaped by individual institutional initiatives responding to specific social conditions. Monks belonging to the new twelfth-century orders imported from Languedoc the idea of producing an exclusively Romance code for legal documents in Spain. It was soon taken over and developed by other groups in the hybrid society of medieval Castile. Professional Jewish scribes appear to be amongst the earliest to join the trend and contribute to its success. The lack of continuity of Spanish Jewish institutions after the expulsion of 1492 has resulted in the destruction of much of the evidence, but there are enough documents, such as the ones studied here, to testify to their decisive contribution to the “invention” of written Spanish.

Keywords
Spanish script, Jewish soferim, Cistercians, Premonstratensians, Mozarabs, nuns, military orders

The culture that coalesced at the end of the twelfth century as a result of the interaction of Christians, Jews and Muslims in Castile, at the northern frontier of al-Andalus, brought about an enduring and fundamental change: the coding scheme for representing the lingua franca of the majority, a variety of Romance which had not been written before as such and which would eventually be known as “Spanish.”¹ The precedents,

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