CONVERTS IN BYZANTINE ITALY:
LOCAL REPRESENTATIONS OF JEWISH-CHRISTIAN RIVALRY

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I. The Role of Conversion in the Medieval World

The theme of conversion has a special place in the Byzantine literature that deals with Christian-Jewish relations. This is manifested in imperial legislation, in formulae of abjuration for Jews who choose to convert to Orthodox Christianity, as well as in stories about Jewish converts. Conversion to Judaism, although much less frequent for obvious reasons, is not absent, and is mentioned in both Christian and Jewish sources.

It is clear that the Byzantine preoccupation with conversion in relation to Jews cannot be separated from Christian-Jewish polemics in general. Nonetheless, Jewish-Christian relations as portrayed in stories of conversion must also be examined in the broader medieval context. Conversion as a political issue was a major concern of emperors from Late Antiquity on, in view of the existence of large non-Chalcedonian Christian communities in the Byzantine Empire. The forced conversions that Heraclius imposed on the Jews in 630/631 are often explained as an act of internal consolidation. When Heraclius seized the Byzantine throne in 610, he soon had to confront the Persian conquests of Palestine and Egypt. Following his victory over the Sassanid Empire in 627, internal consolidation was needed both for

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political and religious reasons. Forced conversions of Jews thus appear as a part of his imperial internal policy.3

Following the Islamic conquests of the seventh century, most of the non-Chalcedonian communities, especially the Monophysites and the Nestorians, were no longer a part of the Byzantine Empire. The Islamic conquests had transformed the international map of the Mediterranean and deprived Byzantium of most of its provinces in the Near East. The Empire was left with approximately one third of its territory and probably less than a third of its population. The Jewish communities, which had been spread all over the Byzantine and Sassanid empires, were now mostly divided between Arab and Byzantine rule. Only a small part of these Jewish communities were left in Byzantium. The Byzantine Jews maintained their position as a religious minority, and by the eighth century they had become the most important religious minority in Byzantium. Moreover, they were now connected to the Jewish communities who lived in Arab lands.

Following the advent of Islam, the situation of the Christian inhabitants of the Byzantine state had also changed. Byzantium found itself on a defensive position vis-à-vis the Arab Caliphate, not only politically, but also, for the first time, religiously. Thus by the eighth century internal Christian unity had become a political necessity.4 As Averil Cameron has shown in her “Images of Authority: Elits and Icons in Late Sixth-Century Byzantium” (PeP 88, 1979), the Iconoclastic crisis, which was both a religious and a political one, can thus be understood as an imperial policy to create a form of religious unity focused on the image of the emperor. This religious and political unity was finally achieved in 843, when icon veneration was officially and definitively restored. It is thus not surprising that Leo III, who initiated the Iconoclastic politics, is also said to have declared in 721/722 a policy of forced conversion of Jews and Montanists alike. As with Heraclius,

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