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# Introduction

MIRIAM FRENKEL

The Alexandrians turned out in force  
to see Cleopatra's children,  
Kaisarion and his little brothers,  
Alexander and Ptolemy,  
who'd been taken out to the Gymnasium for the first time,  
to be proclaimed kings there  
before a brilliant array of soldiers.

Alexander: they declared him  
king of Armenia, Media, and the Parthians.  
Ptolemy: they declared him  
king of Cilicia, Syria, and Phoenicia.  
Kaisarion was standing in front of the others,  
dressed in pink silk,  
on his chest a bunch of hyacinths,  
his belt a double row of amethysts and sapphires,  
his shoes tied with white ribbons  
prinked with rose-coloured pearls.  
They declared him greater than his brothers,  
they declared him King of Kings.

The Alexandrians knew of course  
that this was all just words, all theatre.

But the day was warm and poetic,  
the sky a pale blue,  
the Alexandrian Gymnasium  
a complete artistic triumph,  
the courtiers wonderfully sumptuous,  
Kaisarion all grace and beauty  
(Cleopatra's son, blood of the Lagids):  
and the Alexandrians thronged to the festival,  
full of enthusiasm, and shouted acclamations  
in Greek, and Egyptian, and some in Hebrew,  
charmed by the lovely spectacle—  
though they knew of course what all this was worth,  
what empty words they really were, these kingships.

—Constantine P. Cavafy

Constantine Cavafy (1863–1933), the well-known Alexandrian poet, describes in this poem the coronation of new kings in Alexandria, Egypt. The native Egyptians, as far as he is concerned, know very well that “these kingships” are nothing but “empty words.” Still, they enthusiastically take part in the pompous ceremony and don’t mind cheering “in Greek, and Egyptian, and some in Hebrew.” They constitute a spectrum of nationalities, creeds, and languages who share the same mother country and enjoy its blue skies, warm weather, and beautiful edifices. The country is theirs while the kings are but artificial ornaments in an amusing spectacle. Jews are an indispensable part of this amalgam of nationalities, creeds, and languages, and Hebrew is heard among the multilingual acclamations.

Jews, indeed, lived in Egypt for many centuries, from biblical times until the middle of the previous century. The existence of the earliest communities is attested by the Bible for the early sixth century BCE, through the Persian period, and especially during the Ptolemaic and Roman periods, for which there is much archaeological and literary evidence of extensive Jewish settlement in Egypt.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, Jewish life in medieval Islamic Egypt was for many years an obscure and understudied theme. It was not until the discovery of the Cairo Genizah that this period started to be studied and revealed.

The Cairo Genizah is a trove of over a quarter of a million pages of books and documents that accumulated in a back chamber in the Ben Ezra synagogue, designed to serve as a *bet genizah*. A *bet genizah* is a storage place where writings in Hebrew script are deposited when they are no longer in use or in circulation. The discovery of the Genizah by Western scholars during the last third of the nineteenth century and the gradual research done on them since then has illuminated the history and culture of the entirety of Jewish society in the lands of Islam, particularly during the High Middle Ages (tenth–thirteenth centuries), since most of the Genizah manuscripts date from this period.<sup>2</sup> But, more than any other parts of the Muslim world, the Genizah writings tell the story of the Jews of Egypt during the Middle Ages, which was till then unclear and largely ignored.

It was in medieval Egypt that some of the most prominent Jewish leaders and thinkers operated, Moses Maimonides being perhaps the most famous of them. The present book will not focus on them. It is intended to provide a

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1 See Tal Ilan’s chapter in this volume.

2 Adina Hoffman and Peter Cole, *Sacred Trash: The Lost and Found World of the Cairo Geniza* (New York: Next Book-Schocken, 2011).

broad canvas of Jewish society and culture rather than concentrating on particular persons, influential and famous though they may be. The chapters gathered in this volume venture to offer the reader a wide-ranging picture of Jewish life in medieval Egypt as depicted by the most recent scholarship.

The book opens with two introductory chapters. The first chapter, by Tal Ilan, leads the reader along the road from the Byzantine era of late antiquity into the medieval Islamic period. To use Ilan's words, it is "about the Jewish community of Egypt that gave birth to the Cairo Genizah." Ilan offers a review of the history of the Jews in the Byzantine period and argues that the new Jewish community that was coming into being in Egypt in late antiquity had the identity markers of the Jewish community that produced the Cairo Genizah as of the ninth century CE. The chapter provides an overview of the scanty information available, gathered mainly from papyri, about the geographic dispersion, economic conditions, and legal status of the Jews of Egypt in late antiquity. By reviewing the information about the literary products of this community, which include biblical and liturgical texts, marriage contracts, personal letters, and magical texts, Ilan demonstrates how it was indeed the forerunner of the later medieval community reflected in the Genizah documents. The chapter ends with a discussion of the puzzling absence of contemporary rabbinic texts from Egypt in spite of the well-documented rabbinical activities in Palestine and Babylonia at this time. Ilan provides three possible explanations for this silence.

Yehoshua Frenkel's introductory chapter provides a concise chronological history of Islamic Egypt. It starts with the abrupt Arab-Islamic conquest of Egypt (639–42), goes on to describe the gradual incorporation of the Nile valley into the Islamic Caliphate during the Umayyad period (657–749), and continues to the turbulent Abbasid period (750–868), which marks a turning point in the transformation of the Nile valley from a Christian land to an Islamic territory. It then turns to describe the Tulunid (868–905) and Ikhshidid (935–68) periods, during which Egypt renewed its Mediterranean maritime trade and became a regional power; actually, the strongest land in the eastern Mediterranean basin, a position it retained for many centuries to come. Special attention is given to the Fatimid (969–1171) and Ayyubid (1171–1250) periods, which are also termed "the classical Genizah period," since most Genizah writings originate from that time. It ends with a description of the Mamluk Sultanate (1250–1516), followed by a discussion of its frequent portrayal as a regime of continuous decay. Frenkel's introduction is not merely a chronological

survey of events. The economic, demographic, cultural, social, and political aspects of the various epochs of medieval Egypt are broadly referred to, with special attention given to interreligious relations. It thus supplies the reader with the required background for the Jewish history of this country throughout the Middle Ages.

After these two introductory chapters, the volume goes on to delineate the contours of the Jewish community in medieval Egypt, and to find out where the border stones, which defined the Jewish community of Egypt, were positioned.

This is the task upon which Moshe Yagur embarks in his article. Yagur tries to outline the community's boundaries by focusing on those people who crossed them: apostates, converts, and manumitted slaves who converted to Judaism. He tries to find out, how and when the boundaries were crossed, who crossed them, and what the varying attitudes of members and leaders of the Jewish community towards were these crossings. By examining these three groups of converts, and comparing them, the chapter arrives at the startling conclusion that the movement across religious boundaries was not necessarily one-way, but rather a varied and overlapping movement. Converts to Judaism included European Christians, local Copts, and even local Muslims; many of the converts were manumitted slaves previously purchased by Jews; while Jews themselves converted not only to Islam but also to Christianity. The chapter points at ongoing contacts between converts and their families and former communities. In some cases, Jews remained married to their convert spouses, or even married converts. Moreover, in many cases religious identity could be molded, erased, or reinvented to the extent that one's religious identity was not always clear to other community members. Yagur's conclusion is that communal boundaries were far from being firm and clear, but rather were porous and blurred.

The next chapter, by Mark Cohen, concerns the organizational features of Jewish life in medieval Egypt. It ventures to describe the functioning of Jewish self-government of this time. As in other parts of the Islamic Caliphate, the Jews of Egypt were also allowed to govern themselves in accordance with their ancestral laws, and to elect their own leaders. The chapter describes the governing Jewish institutions, namely the Palestinian *yeshivah* and its head, the *ga'on*, who governed the Jewish communities of Egypt and other countries of the Levant until the end of the eleventh century, as well as the local Nagidate of Egypt, which succeeded them. It then proceeds to describe the local community, which Cohen considers to be "the fundamental cell of organized Jewish communal life in Egypt." The chapter offers a comprehensive

description of the community's heads, officials, and judiciary, discusses its financial infrastructures and ends with a discussion of the local community's internal politics. The chapter takes a double comparative approach, which parallels the Jewish communal life of medieval Egypt to that of the surrounding Muslim society and to that of medieval Europe.

A central feature of Jewish self-government in Egypt was the maintenance of a Jewish judiciary, which implemented Jewish law. This is the topic of Oded Zinger's chapter. By treating the judiciary as a dynamic arena with a lively, dramatic and competitive nature, Zinger offers here a new approach, which aims at discovering "how legal institutions were integrated within the broader social fabric and what people did outside of court with the intention to affect legal action." The chapter starts with a review of past research on Jewish legal institutions in medieval Egypt, and of the various approaches used in their study. Then it describes the Jewish legal arena, which consisted of the local Jewish court and the documents it produced as well as of other, Jewish and Islamic, legal institutions. Special attention is given to the legal act of acquisition (*qinyan*) that forms the basis of most legal activity in Genizah courts. Next, it discusses the social embeddedness of the legal arena, by surveying the ways litigants influenced the legal process by actions outside of legal institutions. Zinger pleads for the social embeddedness of the Jewish legal arena in medieval Egypt not to be considered as corruption, but rather as a major aspect of its dynamic legal culture and as a central component of its strength and vitality. The chapter ends with a description of the different sources of authority of the local Jewish court in medieval Egypt.

The next chapter, by Jessica Goldberg, discusses the economic life of the medieval Jews of Egypt. The chapter starts with a survey of the state of the art in which Goldberg demonstrates the crucial importance of the Cairo Genizah for the study of economic life, not only of medieval Egypt and its Jews but also of Egypt's economic connections with the Islamic Mediterranean and Indian Ocean. At the same time, she also points out the limitations of the Genizah as source material, which can only reflect a partial economic reality. Goldberg discusses the involvement of Jews in the Egyptian economy, and states that "Jews could be found in nearly every economic circumstance possible in medieval Islamic society and in most kinds of work." Contradicting the traditional postulation of Jewish merchants as "cross-cultural" brokers, Goldberg shows that Egyptian Jewish merchants of the eleventh century, as a part of a larger Islamic merchant community, tended rather to be the opposite, namely brokers of the products of their home region into the "international" markets of the Islamic

Mediterranean, and later—to the market centers of the Indian Ocean trade. Although Jews constituted a far more urban segment of Egyptian society than other confessional groups, they were an indispensable part of the Egyptian economy, being deeply embedded not only in trade, but in almost every other profession. Goldberg relates the deep embeddedness of Egyptian Jews in the larger economy to the absence of guilds in the Islamic world, to the organization of most production into small partnership workshops, and to the lack of special status distinctions among professions. It is these conditions, she claims, which made it possible for Jews, as well as for other minority groups, to work in the same industries: “sometimes in competition, sometimes developing the solidarity of profession.” In spite of this deep integration of Jews in the Egyptian economic system, the chapter also notes the particular ways their religious identity affected their economic identity. This was mainly due to the poll tax, which was heavy enough to hinder their economic mobility and also to shape social hierarchy within the community.

The seventh chapter, by Miriam Frenkel, concerns Jewish family life in medieval Egypt. It starts with a short survey of the ways family, kinship, and pedigree were conceived in this society, then goes on to speak about the functions expected and fulfilled by family members. As it turns out that the family’s borders were not confined to blood kin alone, special attention is given to the role of domestic slaves in the family. The chapter discusses at length the institution of marriage: its roles, the legal processes required to establish and to end it, and its structure, including a short discussion of polygyny, which was prevalent and legal in this society, albeit frequently frowned upon. The chapter ends with a description of the relations between family members as they surface in Genizah documents: spousal relations, relations between parents and children and among siblings.

After presenting the main infrastructures of Jewish life in medieval Egypt: the community, the judiciary, the economic frameworks, and the family, the next two chapters are devoted to Jewish literary and spiritual activities. In the eighth chapter, Elisha Russ-Fishbane discusses the mystical movement of thirteenth-century Egypt known as *Hasidut Mitzraim*. This movement, also labeled “Jewish Sufism,” marks a unique chapter in the history of Jewish-Muslim relations. The movement, led by no other than the “head of the Jews” himself, Abraham b. Moses Maimonides (Abraham Maimuni, 1186–1237), aspired at cultivating an inner attachment to God, with the ultimate goal of generating a broad religious revival as the harbinger of messianic redemption. Its devotees, who originated from all parts of the socio-economic spectrum, adopted a harsh

spiritual regimen, which had clear parallels to Sufi rites. Russ-Fishbane considers the movement to be “the richest historical engagement of any known Jewish group with the religious heritage of Islam.” The chapter introduces the reader to Abraham Maimuni’s theological outlook, and discusses his reform project and its consequences. Russ-Fishbane estimates that this episode marks a critical transition from a Jewish dialogue with Sufi and Near Eastern models of piety to “a concrete pietist movement embedded within the fabric of Jewish communal life.”

The next chapter, by Joseph Yahalom, deals with one of the most creative literary genres composed by Egyptian Jews during the Middle Ages, namely, Hebrew poetry. Not only did Hebrew poetry occupy a central place in the spiritual and social life of Egyptian Jewry of this period, writing poetry was also a central medium through which the leadership, and those attached to it, expressed themselves. In this chapter, Yahalom provides a detailed survey of the poetic works of thirteen writers, who lived for certain periods of time in Egypt, and were engaged in writing Hebrew poetry. Some of them, like Moses Maimonides, were among the most prominent Jewish leaders of their time. The survey combines literary analysis of the poems with biographical data about their writers. The poets surveyed are Samuel b. Hosha‘na, Abraham ha-Kohen, Yeshu‘ah b. Nathan, Eli b. Amram, Solomon ha-Kohen b. Joseph, Joseph ibn Abitur, Judah ha-Levi and Aharon ibn al-‘Ammānī, Ele‘azar ha-Kohen ben Khalfūn, Moses Dar‘ī, Moses Maimonides, Anatoli b. Joseph, Joseph ha-Ma‘aravi, and Joseph b. Tanḥum the Jerusalemite. By way of conclusion, the chapter ends with the harsh critiques written by Judah al-Ḥarīzī on the local poets of Egypt. Nevertheless, Yahalom contests Judah al-Ḥarīzī’s stance and praises the unique path of Egyptian poets, who continued the old Eastern tradition of poetry.

Egyptian pietism and Egyptian poetry were two central manifestations of Jewish literary activities in medieval Egypt. The literary products of *Ḥasidut Mitzraim* were articulated in Judeo-Arabic, while most Judeo-Egyptian poetry was written in Hebrew. The next chapter, by Esther-Miriam Wagner, deals with the topic of languages and language varieties used by medieval Egyptian Jews. Her chapter starts with an overview of the variety of languages used by medieval Egyptian Jewry: Judeo-Arabic, Arabic, Hebrew, and Aramaic, and the different function ascribed to each of them, as attested by Genizah manuscripts. An important methodological distinction is made between three different entities: the written language, the spoken language, and the reading tradition. In order to understand the writing habits of this society, Wagner examines the education

system, paying special attention to the training of professional scribes. Most of the chapter is naturally devoted to Judeo-Arabic, which is the most prevalent language used in the Genizah writings. Wagner examines habits of code switching and script switching among several individual Genizah writers, and finds that they demonstrate the Arabic/Judeo-Arabic/Hebrew linguistic continuum that was a feature of medieval Egypt. By examining private and traders' letters, and by using parallels from comparative modern examples and from sociolinguistic theory, she tries to trace certain features of the spoken language. Finally, Wagner arrives at the conclusion that the mixing of the languages used by medieval Egyptian Jews "created particular registers, with the Aramaic and Hebrew content varying decidedly between more religious and more secular genres." In spoken medieval Judeo-Arabic, she assumes a diversity of different registers, bound to particular circumstances.

The volume ends with Amir Mazor's chapter about the Mamluk era, which constituted the last phase in the history of Egyptian Jewry in the Middle Ages. After a comprehensive political and military survey of the era, Mazor turns to describing economic and demographic trends during the Mamluk epoch, and their implications for the Jewish population of Egypt. He shows that although the social, cultural, and intellectual integration of Jews in Mamluk society was limited compared to previous periods, they still were far from being isolated, especially in comparison with the status of the Jews in Latin Europe at the same time. They continued to take part in public and intellectual life, especially during the first century of the Mamluk sultanate. The chapter describes the system of Jewish self-government embodied at this time in the office of the Nagidate, and also discusses at length the state's policy towards the Jews, which was characterized by a stricter enforcement of the Pact of 'Umar.<sup>3</sup> Mazor shows that while some of the most discriminatory and humiliating anti-*dhimmi* laws were promulgated during this time, most of them were enforced for limited periods or never enforced at all. Moreover, in most cases Jews received the protection of the authorities against intolerant actions of the mob. All in all, Mazor cautions that Mamluk state policy should be examined in the social, legal, and economical contexts of the Islamicate society of the Mamluk sultanate. The chapter ends with a description of the economic, social, and cultural revival of the Egyptian Jewish communities toward the end of the fifteenth century, after the expulsion from Spain and the arrival of the Sephardi exiles. This very

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3 See Mark Cohen's chapter in this volume.

last phase may serve as an introduction to the next chapter in the history of the Jews of Egypt, that of Ottoman rule.

The eleven chapters gathered in this volume reveal the rich texture of Jewish life in medieval Egypt. The medieval community, which was the direct successor of the late antique one, did not build high walls to separate itself from its surrounding Islamicate society, yet managed to maintain its particularity and uniqueness. This particularity was anchored in its efficient communal apparatus, based on the right to self-government granted by Muslim rule. Its judicial system was flexible and deeply influenced by the wider society, but this was part of its strength and vitality. Its family life resembled that of the neighboring communities and so did the economic and occupational patterns it assumed. It was in Egypt that “the richest historical engagement of any known Jewish group with the religious heritage of Islam” occurred, through the pietist movement led by Abraham Maimuni, but the same community also produced unique Hebrew poetry, which continued and preserved the old Eastern tradition. The Jews of medieval Egypt used several languages, but clearly preferred Judeo-Arabic, the language that demonstrates more than anything else the singular blend of embeddedness along particularity that describes this society.

# Between the Hellenistic World and the Cairo Genizah: The Jewish Community in Late Antique Egypt

TAL ILAN

This chapter is about the Jewish community of Egypt that gave birth to the Cairo Genizah. In looking for the history of this community one has to start with the dramatic event that effectively killed the previous, thriving Jewish community in Egypt—the Hellenistic-Jewish one that spoke Greek, initiated the first translation of the Bible (into Greek—the Septuagint), hosted a competing Temple to the one in Jerusalem (the Onias Temple), and whose model was Philo of Alexandria. All this came to an end in 117 CE. Since Egypt is also the cradle of (pre-Christian) anti-Semitism,<sup>1</sup> for some time before 116–17 CE tensions between the ruling Romans with their accomplices—the indigenous Egyptian and Greek population—and the Jews had been brewing. In 115 CE the Jews rebelled. What they hoped to achieve, and how the rebellion developed, is mostly unknown,<sup>2</sup> but the meager historical evidence that is at our disposal shows that there were few Jews left in Egypt after this event, and that

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- 1 P. Schäfer, *Judeophobia: Attitudes toward the Jews in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).
  - 2 For an updated discussion, see M. Pucci Ben Zeev, *Diaspora Judaism in Turmoil, 116/117 CE: Ancient Sources and Modern Insights* (Leuven: Peeters, 2005).

virtually nothing of the ancient thriving Hellenistic Jewish community survived the revolt.

If one is looking for a good overview of the history of the Jews in Egypt between the crushing of the Jewish Revolt in 116–17 CE and the first documents deposited in the Cairo Genizah, the best work to consult is still Victor Tcherikover's Prolegomenon to his *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum* (henceforth *CPJ*) that appeared in 1957.<sup>3</sup> The following review is in constant dialogue with that work, since it is impossible to tell the story of this community without recourse to it. After bewailing the destruction of Hellenistic Judaism in 117 CE, and stating categorically that for many decades, perhaps centuries, Jewish life did not succeed in achieving any significant revival in Egypt, Tcherikover took his timeline for describing major events regarding the Jews of Egypt in late antiquity from the writings of Christian church fathers and chronographers. One could argue that he had no choice, since no comparable Jewish reports have survived from the same period. However, by doing so, Tcherikover enslaved himself to the approach the church fathers themselves wanted him to adopt, which is that the Jews were bitter enemies of Christianity, who used every opportunity to attack it and collaborated with all its manifest and hidden enemies.

This is how he told the story: In 335 CE, according to the Bishop of Alexandria, Athenaios, Jews and pagans broke into churches, plundered sanctuaries, and insulted monks and nuns (Athanasios, *Epist. encycl.* 3). In the events after the death of Athenaios in 378 CE, when the Arians were contesting the Catholic Church for supremacy in Alexandria, the Jews, according to another Christian scholar, took part in acts of violence directed against Catholic sanctuaries (Theodoret, *Hist. eccl.* 4. 18). Sometime later, in 415 CE, according to the Church historian Sokrates (*Hist. eccl.* 7. 13) the Jews were expelled from Alexandria, after a showdown between the secular Byzantine governor of the city and Kyrillos, its bishop. When they returned to the city thereafter is impossible to say, but return they did because a number of influential Jews (like Domnos the physician, 474–91 CE)<sup>4</sup> are mentioned in later Christian sources. Finally, during the Sasanian invasion of Egypt in

3 V. Tcherikover (ed.), "Prolegomena: The Late Roman and the Byzantine Period," in *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum*, vol. 1, ed. A. Fuks and M. Stern (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 93–111. Henceforth *CPJI*.

4 Damascaius, in M. Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1980), no. 551.

616–27 CE, according to Eutychios (Ibn Batrik, *Ann.* 2. 245–7), the Jews welcomed the new (non-Christian) invaders.<sup>5</sup>

All these observers are Christian and see in the Jews collaborators with the enemies of Christianity. There is no doubt that all three events—clashes between Catholics and Arians in the fourth century, between the Monophysite Alexandrian church and the Orthodox Roman governor in the fifth century, and the invasion of Christian Egypt by the Zoroastrian Sasanians at the beginning of the seventh century—were major events for the history of Christianity in Egypt, and that the Jews were indeed expelled from Alexandria in the fifth century, but they probably touch only marginally on Jewish interests or political choices. It would be much more plausible to see the Jews in all these instances as victims of these politics than as active parties in them. Their mention in them is often far more a rhetorical tool of Christian theologians than a reflection of real events.

Rightly, Tcherikover placed his history of the Jews of Egypt in his introduction to a collection of Jewish papyri from the Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine periods. Much of what we know about the Jews of Egypt from these periods derives from papyri—perishable material that has miraculously survived the ravages of time in Egypt because of the dry climate. Papyri become progressively more important for telling this story as time goes by, since for the Hellenistic period we have more external information about the Jews of Egypt than for the early Roman period, and for the early Roman period we have more information about the Jews than for the late Roman and Byzantine periods. Tcherikover and his *CPJ* team, however, concentrated on Greek papyri, and ironically, these also become less informative with the passage of time. There are more Greek papyri on the Jews of Egypt for the Hellenistic period than for the Roman period, and more such papyri for the Roman period than for the Byzantine period.

Better sources for Jewish history in this period are papyri in the native languages of the Jews—Hebrew and Aramaic. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, papyri in these languages began to be published by European scholars.<sup>6</sup> From these papyri, Tcherikover drew conclusions about the

<sup>5</sup> *CPJI*, 96–100.

<sup>6</sup> In 1879 Moritz Steinschneider published Hebrew and Aramaic papyrus fragments housed in the Egyptian Museum in Berlin, apparently hailing from the Fayyum: M. Steinschneider, “Hebräische Papyrus-Fragmente aus dem Fayyûm,” *Magazin für die Wissenschaft des Judenthums* 6 (1879): 250–4. In 1886 David Müller and David Kaufmann published such papyri housed in Vienna, also apparently from the Fayyum: D. H. Müller and D. Kaufmann,

introduction of Hebrew into the post-117 CE Jewish community, which in its previous incarnation had not a scrap of this language in its vocabulary. He rightly claimed that the source of influence and inspiration for this new Jewish community was neighboring Palestine, from where one may assume most of the newly settled Jews in Egypt had migrated. Tcherikover addressed these papyri very briefly and did not publish them in the third volume of *CPJ*, because of his concentration on Greek papyri. This review will pay much more attention to these Hebrew and Aramaic papyri.

For more internal evidence on the Jews in Egypt at this time Tcherikover searched rabbinic literature. This was an important move, because only the story told by the authors of this literature was eventually incorporated into the story of post-Temple Judaism, until the arrival of Islam. However, what Tcherikover found was very disappointing. He found in it some Egyptian rabbis, but only two (a certain Rabbi Zakkai of Alexandria—for example, *yKet* 4:6, 28d—and perhaps also a Tanḥum son of Papa—*yQid* 3:12, 64d) could really be dated to the time he was researching. Both appear in dialogue with the rabbinic community in Palestine. Tcherikover took this to support his thesis on the close relationship between the Jews of Egypt and those of rabbinic Palestine. However, as we will see below, rabbinic influence on Egyptian Jews at the time is virtually non-existent.

In the last sixty years no up-to-date overview has been written on the subject of the Jews in Egypt in late antiquity, either because it has been assumed that there is no new evidence to consult, or because the area of research has not come under review, or both. However, in light of the editorial work underway<sup>7</sup> for the collection and redaction of a new *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum* (henceforth *N.CPJ*), which incorporates papyri that have been published since the completion of the old *CPJ*, there is new evidence, and a review of the history of the Jews in the Byzantine period can now be offered.<sup>8</sup> It will be argued

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“Über die hebräischen Papyri,” in *Mittheilungen aus der Sammlung der Papyrus Erzherzog Rainer*, vol. 1, ed. J. Karabaček (Vienna: Verlag der k.k. Hof- und Staatsdruckerei, 1886), 38–44. In 1905 scraps of such papyri were found by the British Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt in their excavations at Oxyrhynchus, and Cowley, who edited them, dates them to about 400 CE: A. E. Cowley, “Hebrew and Aramaic Papyri,” *JQR* 16 (1904): 1–8; idem, “Notes on Hebrew Papyrus Fragments from Oxyrhynchus,” *Journal of Egypt Archaeology* 2 (1915): 209–13.

7 N. Hacham and T. Ilan, *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum* vol. IV (Jerusalem and Berlin: De Magnes and De Gruyter, 2020); vol. V, in press, vol. VI, in preparation.

8 For more on Tcherikover’s attitude, see now T. Ilan, “The Jewish Community in Egypt before and after 117 CE in Light of Old and New Papyri,” in *Jewish and Christian Communal*

that the new Jewish community that was coming into being in Egypt in late antiquity had the identity markers of the Jewish community that produced the Cairo Genizah as of the ninth century CE. The chapter begins with a short overview of what we know from this period (especially from papyri) about the Jews in Egypt, about their geographic dispersion, about their economic conditions, and about their legal status. As we will see, this is meager. It will end with a review of what we know of the Jewish community and their literary output, mostly in Hebrew and Aramaic, and demonstrate how these constitute evidence that this community was indeed the forerunner and the matrix of the Genizah community.

### The geographic distribution of the Jewish settlement in Byzantine Egypt

The most important city of settlement for Jews in late antiquity, as also of the earlier Hellenistic Jewish community, was the great metropolis, Alexandria. Papyri are no good for telling anything about the Jews of Alexandria, because the humid climate of that city has not allowed for their preservation. Thus, the papyri tell us about the Jews of Egypt who lived upriver. Sometimes, however, these were in touch with the Jews of Alexandria. CPJ 505, a fragmentary letter, tells of a Jew coming to some unknown location up-river from Alexandria. It is unlikely, though, that the papyrus was written by a Jew or to a Jew, and it tells little about the connection between Jews of the *chora* (that is, rural Egypt) and those of Alexandria. On the other hand, among the new papyri a *ketubbah* from Antinoopolis dated to 417 CE, written in Aramaic and housed today in the papyri collection of Cologne, records the marriage of Samuel son of Sympti (or Sambati, שמואל בר סמפטי) with a Mitra daughter of Lazar (מיטרא ברת לעזר) from Alexandria.<sup>9</sup> This papyrus clearly furnishes evidence for a relationship between the metropolis and the hinterland, although with the state of knowledge at our disposal now, not much importance can be attached to it.

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*Identities in the Roman World*, ed. Y. Furstenberg (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 201–24. See also idem, “Julia Crispina of the Babatha Archive Revisited: A Woman between the Judean Desert and the Fayum in Egypt, between the Diaspora Revolt and the Bar Kokhba War,” in *Gender and Social Norms in Ancient Israel, Early Judaism and Early Christianity: Texts and Material Culture*, ed. Michaela Bauks, Katharina Galor, and Judith Hartenstein (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2019), 269–76.

9 C. Sirat, P. Cauderlier, M. Dukan, and M. A. Friedman, *La Ketouba de Cologne: Un contrat de mariage juif à Antinopolis*, vol. 12 of *Papyrologica Coloniensis* (Opladen: Westdeutschen Verlag, 1986).

The ancient Jewish community in Upper Egypt, which Tcherikover dated to as early as the Ptolemaic period, but which, we argue in *N.CPJ*, should actually be dated back even further, to the Jewish settlement at Elephantine in the Persian period, seems to have been hit hardest by the Jewish Revolt.<sup>10</sup> Tcherikover notes the complete silence of this region about Jews after 117 CE.<sup>11</sup> Only one new document may change this picture slightly: an ostrakon from Edfu, dated paleographically to the seventh century, listing payments of the *annona* tax by three separate groups: captives, carpet-weavers, and the Hebrews (*SB XIV 11844*). In the Byzantine period the term “Hebrew” was used side-by-side with, or even replacing, *Ioudaios* for Jews.<sup>12</sup> This indicates perhaps that some Jews had recently come to reside in Edfu. However, they seem just as foreign in the region as the “captives” mentioned next to them (although obviously the third group, the carpet-weavers, were hardly foreign). Most Jewish papyri of clear provenance are from the Fayyum,<sup>13</sup> from Oxyrhynchos,<sup>14</sup> and from Hermopolis/Antinoopolis.<sup>15</sup> This distribution of Jewish papyri is confirmed in the new documents collected since *CPJ*. However, we may wonder whether Jews chose to live in Oxyrhynchos and Hermopolis because they were such great metropolises, or whether we know about the Jewish community in these locations because they are both sites of great papyri excavations and publications. Volume 3 of *CPJ* counted nine papyri from Oxyrhynchos. In 1964, when the corpus appeared in print, only twenty-nine Oxyrhynchos papyri volumes had been published. In the intervening years, another fifty-three volumes have appeared. It is rather disappointing that they have only yielded another seven relevant documentary papyri,<sup>16</sup> indicating perhaps not a major presence of Jews at the site, but rather a major presence of Oxyrhynchos in the papyri record. These Greek papyri, however, are not the only evidence for a Jewish presence in

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10 *N.CPJ* IV, 21-5.

11 *CPJ*, vol. 1, 94.

12 Hacham and Ilan, “Introduction.”

13 *CPJ*, nos. 451, 455, 459, 460, 461, 466, 474, all from the Late Roman period, but also no. 512, from the Byzantine period.

14 *CPJ*, nos. 452b, 465, 473, 475, 477, 516, from the Late Roman period; nos. 503, 509, 510, from the Byzantine period.

15 *CPJ*, nos. 453, 506 (Hermopolis), 508 and 511 (Antinoopolis).

16 (1) P.Oxy. XLIII 3125; (2) XLIV 3203; (3) XLVI 3314; (4) L 3574; (5) LV 3805; (6) LXI 4123; (7) LXXVII 5119; (8) LXXXIII 5364; and see also published elsewhere (9) *SB XVI 12553*; (10) P.CtYBR inv. 154 v; (11) P. CtYBR inv. 760.

Oxyrhynchos. The majority of the Hebrew and Aramaic papyri of this period were also excavated at Oxyrhynchos.

### The economic status of the Jews in Byzantine Egypt

In order to describe the economic life of the Jews in the period after the Jewish Revolt, Tcherikover used evidence found in Greek papyri that mention Jewish peasants (*CPJ* 470, 471, 474), a donkey-driver (*CPJ* 472), a guard (*CPJ* 475), and even a higher-ranking labor-manager (*CPJ* 477), all from the third and the fourth centuries. After the rise of Christianity, the papyri he collected revealed Jews engaging in herding or tanning (*CPJ* 509), wine-trading (*CPJ* 508, 512), and cloth-dying (*CPJ* 511). The meagerness of this evidence led him back to his thesis about the importance of Christian anti-Judaism for defining the status of the Jews in this period: "Their economic activity was seriously hampered by the harsh conditions created in Egypt, as elsewhere in the Empire, by the new epoch, especially by the hostile attitude of the Church, perceptible in the economic field as in every other."<sup>17</sup> Even when he did find one Jewish landowner in the Oxyrhinchite nome from the sixth century (*CPJ* 510), he refused to believe it, stating:

[T]hese Jews, consequently, were legally regarded as being in independent possession of some land, but it is doubtful whether they were in fact independent landowners. The close vicinity of the mighty family of the Apiones, representatives of Egyptian early-medieval feudalism, would hardly leave the small landowners of the neighborhood any considerable degree of independence.<sup>18</sup>

We find Tcherikover voicing surprise at the fact that "a hundred years after their expulsion we find the Jews of Alexandria again rich and influential."<sup>19</sup> It should be noted, however, that he has moved here not just from poor to rich but from one source to another. Tcherikover found poor Jews in the papyri. All that Tcherikover knows about rich Jews derives from tendentious anti-Jewish Christian literary compositions.

New papyri only produce more of the same sort of evidence. From the second and third centuries we have a peasant (*P.Wisc.* II 57) and two landowners

<sup>17</sup> *CPJ* I, 104.

<sup>18</sup> *CPJ* I, 104–5.

<sup>19</sup> *CPJ* I, 104.

(one of them a woman: P.Petaus 126; SB XVI 12553); in the fourth century we have two wine dealers (one of them from Palestine—P.Oxy. LXI 4123; L, 3574) and a purple dealer (P. Herm. Rees 52). From the fifth century we have one merchant (*pragmateus*—BGU XII, 2161); and from the sixth century a woman who rents a bakery—she must have been a baker (P.Brooklyn 15). All these together add up to eighteen persons mentioned in papyri, whose economic circumstances can be glimpsed. For a time period of over 500 years (117–640 CE), this is a negligible number, and this has been interpreted by Tcherikover to mean that the Jewish community in Egypt, which had been decimated in 117 CE, did not really recover until the Arab conquest.

However, it is much more likely that we know of many more Jews and their economic circumstances, especially from the later centuries in the papyri, but we simply cannot identify them as Jewish. In the early Roman period, Jewish papyri have been identified as such based on biblical names. However, once Christians begin to make extensive use of these names, distinguishing between Jew and Christian becomes almost impossible. In the Byzantine period Greek papyri become ever less useful for telling the story of Judaism in Egypt.

### The legal status of the Jews

Did the laws applicable to the Egyptians in Egypt apply to Jews? Were they singled out after the revolt for special treatment—first as punishment for the uprising and later, with the rise of Christianity, out of mere hostility? Due to lack of information, Tcherikover could not really answer any of these questions. He wrote:

In A.D. 212 the famous *Constitutio Antoniniana* of Caracalla bestowed Roman rights upon the inhabitants of the entire Roman Empire, and Jews were no exception to the rule. In the documents the new citizens are styled Aurelii, and some papyri mention Jewish Aurelii (Nos. 473, 474, 477, 503, 508). Jurists have long debated whether the promulgation of *Constitutio Antoniniana* meant that the local laws and customs were replaced by the Roman law. It is now commonly accepted that the local civic units continued their functions even under Roman law. Thus the Jewish communities and the right of their members “to live according to their ancestral laws” remained untouched.<sup>20</sup>

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20 CPJI, 100.

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