

---

## Approaches to the Study of Jewish Ethnicity and Ethnic Myths

Ethnicity and nationalism have always played a central role in the shaping of society. A people's conception of itself and its relationship to coteritorial, contiguous, and geographically distant peoples influences the interpretation and transmission of ethnic myths, as well as the shape of society and its aspirations for the future. Recently, the phenomenon of ethnic and national self-definition has been enjoying mounting attention among scholars and laymen alike. Within an ethnic group, as well as among outside observers, the topic often generates impassioned debates. The internecine fighting and "ethnic cleansing" that have followed in the wake of the recent dismantlement and reshaping of the former Yugoslavia and Soviet Union are two extreme cases in point. Even in the absence of violence, few Greeks are likely to react with equanimity to the proposition that their ancestors might have been in the main descended from non-Hellenic ethnic stock, say Slavs, Illyrians, and Turks. The recent objections of the Greek government to the use of the name "Macedonia," the name of a Greek province, by a neighboring sovereign Slavic state (there was no problem as long as the territory was a part of the Yugoslav federation), is yet another example of the volatility that attends discussions of ethnicity.

Beliefs in historical origins often necessitate largescale rewriting of historical facts (Lowenthal 1985). This means that the student of ethnic and historical origins has to reconstruct two related, but independent, phenomena: the historical facts surrounding the ethnic origins of the group, and the factors determining how the group chooses to fashion its myths of origin. Exploring ethnic origins is a fascinating exercise in historical and linguistic reconstruction and in group identification, and requires the combined efforts of a number of disciplines. The present

study will attempt to shed light on both questions—the ethnic origins of the Sephardic Jews, as well as the origins of their myths of origin and self-definition. Finally, this study will indirectly cast light on the question of how and when the notion of a single “Jewish people” may have been contrived. The origins of the “Jews”—taken either in their totality or in individual groups—is a particularly intriguing conundrum due to the centuries-long “dispersal” of the Jews across Africa, Asia, and Europe, and their heterogeneous racial and cultural makeup. The role of Judaism in the creation and dissemination of Christianity and Islam has always assured a considerable interest in the history of the Jews, and has lead many observers to accept post-Christian and post-Islamic Judaism and Jewish culture as direct continuations of Old Palestinian Judaism and Jewish culture.

In this volume, I will argue that early diaspora Judaism and Jewish culture, from their formation up to approximately the 10th century of our era, were syncretistic constructs of pagan, Christian, and Muslim elements and some Palestinian Jewish elements in varying degrees of authenticity. Following the 12th century, widespread conversion to Judaism ceased and Judaism and Jewish culture in a number of Christian and Arab lands underwent a process of “Judaization” (usually accompanied by some degree of Hebraization of the vernacular languages and religious terminology); this enhanced the links of diaspora Jewish cultures and religion to their alleged Old Palestinian forebears. Hence, all contemporary forms of Judaism and Jewish culture are relatively recently “Judaized” non-Jewish constructs rather than direct evolutions of Old Palestinian Judaism and Jewish culture.

According to the *opinio communalis*, Jewish diaspora groups developed when Palestinian Jews began to emigrate in large numbers to Egypt and Asia Minor, and in smaller numbers to southern Europe as early as the 3rd century B.C.; after the Romans destroyed the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 A.D., Palestinian Jews emigrated to southern Europe in ever growing numbers. I do not see how Palestinian Jews could have provided the nucleus of the newly forming European Jewish communities, since most of the Jews abroad, as well as in Palestine, early espoused non-Jewish cultures or the form of Judaism known as Christianity, which was ultimately to distance itself sharply from those few Jewish groups that retained some sort of Jewish identity. Linguistically, most of the diaspora Jews appear to have switched to Greek as their native or

dominant language, continuing a development that had already been in progress in Palestine itself for several centuries.

Hence, in my view, the Jewish diaspora communities must have comprised from the outset a majority non-Palestinian, non-Jewish population that became attached to the Jewish communities (either informally or through an official act of conversion), and a minority Palestinian Jewish component. This is the main reason why both Palestinian Jewish languages—Hebrew and Judeo-Aramaic—were abandoned abroad in such a short period of time. The loss of distinctiveness of the Jews in Europe was accelerated when Jewish cultural and religious patterns were adopted by large numbers of non-Jews and migration of Jews from Palestine tapered off. Despite the radical change in definition that I have proposed, I will continue to use the ethnonym “Jew” in the following discussions, in order to avoid terminological complications. The reader should note that in reference to Palestine, up to about the 3rd century A.D., I will use the term “Jew” as the designation of a Semitic people in Palestine speaking one or more Semitic languages, Hebrew and Judeo-Aramaic, or Judeo-Greek; in the diasporas that first developed in the early Christian era in North Africa and Europe, I use the term “Jew” to denote rather a member of a religious community, whose ethnic origins were more often than not non-Palestinian, and whose native language was usually a Judaized version of a coterritorial non-Jewish language—but never Hebrew or Judeo-Aramaic.

Not all the claims of Jewish groups to be descended from the Old Palestinian Jews have been readily accepted. This is because many scholars who have sought to identify historical venues of conversion to Judaism on the basis of racial criteria have operated with two assumptions: that it is possible in principle to distinguish between “more” and “less” genuine Jewish roots among the contemporary Jews, and since the majority of the contemporary Jews are members of the Caucasian race, “genuine” Jews should look like Europeans. By this reasoning, small non-European Jewish communities in India, Ethiopia, and China would be classified as the descendants of converts to Judaism.

There are three further reasons for stigmatizing non-European Jews as descendants of converts. They are usually relatively small in number; they have lived for centuries in isolation from other Jewish groups, and as a result do not share all innovations that characterize many less isolated and larger Jewish communities; and when they have had contact with larger Jewish groups, such as the Ashkenazim and Sephardim, they tend

to be dependent on the latter for religious instruction and literature. This creates the impression that their knowledge of Judaism and Jewish practices was historically superficial or derivative.

Among the non-European Jews, only some of the Arab Jews (Yemenites and Iraqis) have ever been granted an authentic Jewish pedigree by some observers—on the assumption that the contemporary communities were the uninterrupted descendants of the Jews attested in those areas over two thousand years ago. Gerson-Kiwi (1981:157) and Johnson (1987:182) are impressed with the “Palestinian pedigree” of the Yemenite Jews, but the 19th-century German sociologist, Andree, characterized non-European Jews, such as the western Libyan Jews (from *Garyān*), Kurdish Jews, Indian Jews (from Cochin), and Chinese Jews, as all of non-Jewish origin since they were similar in racial and cultural traits to the coterritorial non-Jews (1881:205, 219, 242, 245, 247). Curiously, the latter condition does not seem to have disqualified the European Jews for Andree! The Yemenites themselves were dubious about the Jewish roots of the European Jews with whom they came in contact in the late 19th and early 20th century. (For further discussion, see Landberg 1906: 273, cited by Godbey 1930:186 and fn 20, and the discussion by Goitein 1931, and Ben-Zvi 1961 in chapter 3 this volume.) The contemporary Iranian-speaking Jews in Iran, northern Iraq, southeast Turkey, Afghanistan, Daghستان (the Caucasus), and Uzbekistan, though first attested in the Iranian cultural and linguistic area from the first millennium B.C., have never been named as certain descendants of the Old Palestinian Jews (perhaps because they are speakers of non-Semitic languages). For a discussion of the origins of the Iranian Jewish communities, see Weissenberg 1911, 1913a, 1913b, and Efron 1994:116–17; the latter provides a detailed analysis of the late 19th- and early 20th-century views of Jews on the possible existence of a Palestinian Jewish prototype among contemporary diaspora Jews.

Obviously, the sheer numbers of Jews with a “European” countenance cannot render the Ashkenazim and Sephardim the obvious heirs to the “Jewish people.” The predominantly Palestinian Jewish ethnic origins of the two major constituent members of the Jewish people have to be demonstrated with more rigorous arguments than statistics.

The student who seeks to uncover the ethnic origins of the Jews (or of any people for that matter) faces three complications:

- (a) The content of a native ethnonym may have shifted through time and space; for example, *Ashkenazic* originally designated an

Iranian non-Jewish people, then the Slavs, and finally the Germans along with the coterritorial Germano-West Slavic Jews; for the last several centuries, only the descendants of the latter, most of whom had migrated since the 13th century to monolingual Slavic-speaking lands, are designated Ashkenazim. Such extreme denotational shifts through time and space are not at all unusual. The name *Rus'* originally designated a Slavic state in what is now the southeastern Ukraine, whereas subsequently the name became attached to the ancestors of the Russians, thus precipitating a change in the naming of the Ukrainians. For example, *R malorossy*, literally "little Russians," or *R ukraincy*, Ukrainian *ukrajinci*, literally, "the people living in the border lands (of southern Russia)." In addition, the Ukrainians have a number of regional ethnic names, especially in the western-most reaches of their historical territory, but no widely accepted native all-inclusive ethnic name.

(b) Ethnic groups often believe they are descended from another contemporary or extinct group, for example, many Berbers believe they are descended from the Philistines (see chapter 2); coterritorial Arabs and Jews often share this belief. Sometimes natives and non-natives espouse different views of descent, for example, until recently many Russians believed that the Belorussian language broke off from "Old Russian" stock due to the differential impact of foreign (Lithuanian and Polish) influences on the former. For further discussion, see Wexler 1977a, chapter 3 regarding the impact of these views on the development of Slavic historical linguistics. The idea that Belorussian resulted from a relatively recent splitting off from an "Old Russian" trunk was rejected by most Belorussians who were in a position to express their views free of Czarist or Soviet censorship; a balanced analysis would ascribe roughly equal antiquity to the formation of each of the present three Eastern Slavic languages—Belorussian, Russian, and Ukrainian.

(c) As a result of mass migrations, the homeland of a people may shift, for example, the Albanians are now located in the south-western corner of the Balkan Peninsula, but linguistic facts show that they were once neighbors of the Rumanians in the east. A cursory comparison of the ethnic map of the European continent now and 1,500 years ago would show the extent of such migrations. If the contemporary Jews were indeed descended from the Old Palestinian Jews, then they would constitute the most dramatic case of homeland

abandonment, since the overwhelming majority of the Jews became dispersed across Africa, Asia, and Europe, while, until recently, only tiny remnants were historically resident at any one time in the alleged ancestral homeland, Palestine.

For several years I have been examining a variety of linguistic and non-linguistic data with the hope of finding a plausible origin for the Ashkenazic, or north European, historically Yiddish-speaking, Jews. In a recent book entitled *The Ashkenazic Jews: a Slavo-Turkic people in search of a Jewish identity* (1993), I concluded that it is unlikely that the Ashkenazic Jews, who constitute the overwhelming majority of the Jews in the world today, could be descended in significant numbers from Eastern Mediterranean Palestinian Jewish ethnic stock. All the indices—genetic, ethnographic, religious, and linguistic—reveal little evidence of an uninterrupted link between the contemporary Jews and the Old Palestinian Jews. At best, I can reveal attempts by a scattered so-called “Jewish” population in parts of Europe, Asia, and Africa less than a millennium ago to *establish* a Jewish identity by imitating genuine Old Palestinian Jewish practices (as recorded in the Bible and talmudic literature), and by borrowing heavily upon Biblical Hebrew terminology to denote their religious practices (of Jewish and non-Jewish origins both). Indeed, the linguistic and ethnographic data of the Ashkenazic Jews lead me inexorably to the conclusion that the Ashkenazic Jews very likely descended from a population mix whose primary components were Slavo-Turkic proselytes, and a considerably intermarried Palestinian Jewish minority.

I maintain that ethnic Palestinian Jews in Hellenized Asia Minor, and to a lesser extent in Italy, practicing various forms of Judaism, succeeded in attracting to their communities sizeable numbers of non-Jews, both pagans and Christians. In the early Christian period, when largescale immigration of Jews out of Palestine had virtually ceased, all the Jewish communities that took root in Europe, North Africa, and Asia Minor consisted of a majority proselyte population and a minority of Palestinian ethnic Jews. Greek (in a slightly Judaized form) was probably the native language of most European diaspora Jews in an enormous territory spanning Asia Minor and the Black Sea region in the east, and North Africa and Spain in the west (Wexler 1985).

The crystalization of the Ashkenazic Jews, resulting from a mix of mainly Slavic and Turkic proselytes to Judaism and Palestinian Jewish

ethnic stock, took place in three major venues. These are, in chronological order: the Balkans, where Slavs, Turkic Avars, and Jews of various geographical and ethnic origins could have met for the first time in the 6th century; Kievan Rus' and the neighboring Ponto-Caspian steppes—the modern Ukraine, where the Turkic ruling class of the Khazar empire converted to Judaism in the 8th century, an act which also probably resulted in the conversion to Judaism of some Eastern Slavs and Iranians who were subject to Khazar domination as well; and the mixed Germano-Slavic lands—present-day eastern Germany which, I suspect, provided numerous Sorbian and some German proselytes to Judaism, approximately between the 9th and 12th centuries. Elements of Balkan and Germano-Slavic folklore and religious practices are still very prominent among the Ashkenazim (Wexler 1991, 1992, and 1993c).

In my book on the ethnic origins of the Ashkenazic Jews, I also presented the fruits of recent linguistic research that prompted me to formulate two new hypotheses regarding the origins of the languages spoken and written traditionally by the Ashkenazic Jews:

(a) In my view, the traditional language of the Ashkenazic Jews, Yiddish, developed when Jewish speakers of Sorbian, a Western Slavic language (spoken today by a dwindling group of at most 70,000 Sorbs in Germany who are almost all bilingual in German), relexified their language, i.e., made a partial language shift, to High German vocabulary, between the 9th and 12th centuries. Since the original Sorbian syntactic and phonological systems were retained, and only the Slavic lexicon was replaced by German, Yiddish must be classified as a member of the Slavic family of languages. It is the preponderance of German lexicon in Yiddish that has created the nearly universally accepted illusion that Yiddish is a form of High German. The Ashkenazic Jews also carried out relexification of their unspoken language of literature and liturgy, when they replaced the lexicon of Old Hebrew texts by German vocabulary to produce a “Yiddish” calque language, which was actually Hebrew grammar and derivational strategies combined with German vocabulary.

(b) It is clear that Modern Israeli Hebrew cannot be a “revived” form of Old Semitic Hebrew, because “linguistic revival” is totally impossible. In fact, Modern Hebrew utilizes the syntactic and phonological systems of Yiddish (the native language of the first Hebrew language planners), with only the vocabulary being of Semitic (mainly

Biblical) Hebrew stock. Hence, Modern Hebrew, like its genetic parent Yiddish, must also be defined as a Western Slavic language. The Old Semitic Hebrew morphological processes that Modern Hebrew exhibits were received through the medium of the borrowed Hebrew vocabulary and cannot constitute an argument against my claim (Horvath and Wexler 1994). For the last century or so, Modern Hebrew has been cultivating additional cognate Polish and Eastern Slavic patterns of discourse and derivation; hence, Modern Hebrew is unique among the Slavic languages in manifesting such a diversified Slavic impact (Wexler 1990b and 1995).

The Slavo-Turkic proselytic origins that I postulated for the Ashkenazic Jews and the relexification processes that produced spoken and written Yiddish and the unspoken “Yiddish” translation language of Biblical Hebrew are relevant for four reasons to understanding the ethnic makeup of the non-Ashkenazic Jewish groups and their linguistic profile:

(a) Like the Ashkenazic Jews, the Sephardic Jews also descend from a proselyte majority and an Old Palestinian Jewish minority. There is no basis to the claim that the Sephardic Jews are “more Semitic” in racial type than the Ashkenazic Jews (Weissenberg 1909: 235, Efron 1994:114–17).

(b) Almost everywhere in the world, the Slavo-Turkic Ashkenazim, as the overwhelming majority group among the Jews, have been exercising a strong influence on other Jewish groups. As I will show, Sephardic culture first became exposed to Ashkenazic influences in the early 14th century *in Spain* (by which time the Jews in the Germano-Slavic lands had fully relexified their Western Slavic language, Sorbian, to High German vocabulary); the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 catapulted the Sephardic Jews into even more extensive contact with Ashkenazic (and other) Jews in the Ottoman Empire, North Africa, and elsewhere. Thus, the rapid on-going Ashkenazicizing of the non-Ashkenazic Jews in Israel has roots reaching back some seven centuries.

(c) Significant numbers of Slavs, mainly, but not exclusively from the Germano-Slavic lands, were sold into slavery in the Iberian Peninsula and North Africa between the 10th and 15th centuries; as I will discuss in chapter 2, this population could have included Slavs who were already Jews or Judaizers in their previous homelands or who became such in the employ of Jewish owners in their new homelands.



(d) The Sephardic Jews, both in Muslim and Christian Spain, replaced the native lexicon of unspoken Old Hebrew texts by Arabic and Spanish to produce their own calque “translations” of Old Hebrew; it is also quite likely that when the Iberian Jews began switching from colloquial Judeo-Arabic to Spanish after the 11th century, many of them also carried out a partial language shift, by relexifying Judeo-Arabic to Spanish, rather than adopt standard Spanish outright.

This book applies the methodology developed in my *Ashkenazic Jews: A Slavo-Turkic people in search of a Jewish identity*, whereby linguistic and ethnographic data are taken as the primary tools for the reconstruction of the geographic and ethnic origins of a Jewish group, with historical documentation serving as corroborating evidence. As I have just indicated, while there are considerable parallels between the formation and evolution of the Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews (see also chapter 6 this volume), the lack of parallels in historical development and in the availability of the data, requires from time to time adjustments in the common methodology to deal with the unique research challenges that arise in the Sephardic context.

In the absence of unequivocal genetic or historical documentation, I had to base my claims for the origins of the Ashkenazic Jews almost exclusively on linguistic and ethnographic data. In many instances, the nonhistorical data helped me to formulate fresh interpretations of documented facts whose significance has long been debated. This is tantamount to claiming that historical data can only have a secondary, corroborating role to play in historical linguistic and ethnographic research. This point has been made before; consider the remarks of Ewald Wagner regarding the reconstruction of a Yemenite substratum in Iberian Arabic (a topic I shall have occasion to return to in chapter 4):

...historical facts do not contradict the possibility today of a transplanting of Ethiopian linguistic material from Yemen to North Africa. On the contrary, linguistics might perhaps in this case assist history somewhat in the face of sparse information about the tribal composition of the North African Arabs (1966:278-79).

A student of Jewish history cannot help but notice the extent to which Jewish communities around the world display numerous cultural, religious, and linguistic similarities with the surrounding non-Jewish

majorities; often the similarities descend to the level of very minute details. There are four explanations for these similarities:

(a) Cultural and religious patterns shared by Jews and non-Jews could be chance independent developments in each community that did not arise through contact.

(b) Non-Jews borrowed cultural and religious patterns from Jews.

(c) Jews borrowed cultural and religious patterns from non-Jews.

(d) Jews received cultural and religious patterns from non-Jews when the latter joined Jewish communities, and eventually formed the majority components of the latter. If all “Jewish” diaspora communities comprised far more members of non-Jewish proselyte origin than ethnic Palestinian Jews, then it would be more appropriate to speak of the originally non-Jewish cultural and religious practices as inherited from the non-Jews.

The first explanation is unlikely given the extent of the similarities involved; while the second and third explanations are valid at different historical periods, the varied evidence suggests that the fourth explanation best accounts for the rise of the Jewish diaspora communities before and after the collapse of independent Judea at the hands of the Romans in the late 1st century A.D. A major implication of the fourth model is that the so-called Jewish languages may turn out to have been developed by non-Jewish proselytes to Judaism and not by the descendants of Old Palestinian Jews. In such a case, the term “Jewish languages” is misleading (chapter 6 this volume).

I reconstruct a major proselyte contribution to the ethnic origins of the Iberian Jews for two reasons:

(a) The volume of linguistic and ethnographic features that link the Iberian Jews with Berbers and Arabs argues against mere diffusion of non-Jewish patterns of speech and cultural behavior to the coteritorial Jews.

(b) A major proselyte component has already been identified, at least to my satisfaction, in the formation of the Ashkenazic Jews—who today constitute some 80 percent of the Jewish population in the world.

The results of my study of the Ashkenazic Jews aroused my curiosity about the ethnic roots of other Jewish communities. In particular, I was interested in determining whether there were any Jewish communities

that might be able to lay claim to a more significant Palestinian Jewish component in their ethnogenesis than the Ashkenazim.

The very preoccupation with this question is somewhat of a novelty in recent times; most scholars do not regard the topic of Sephardic (or of any other Jewish) ethnic origins to be a burning issue. Most students of the Jews, as well as the Sephardic Jews themselves, assume that the Iberian Jews are overwhelmingly of Palestinian Jewish origin who have historically always been closely identified with the Ibero-Romance language and culture area since the dawn of their diaspora. The clearly demonstrable Berbero-Arab impact on the Iberian Jews has usually been envisaged as transitory, though it was profound at different historical periods. The disinterest in exploring the ethnic roots of the Sephardic (as well as other) Jews stems, first and foremost, from the paucity of available historical documentation of Jewish settlement in Europe, Asia, and North Africa during the first millennium A.D. In more recent times, the disinterest in Jewish ethnic origins is also fueled by ideological agendas, such as political Zionism, that is predicated on the belief that the contemporary Jews were in the main the direct descendants of the Old Palestinian Jews. Once we recognize that the necessarily fragmentary historical documentation of events that took place so far back in the past (the interpretation of which is fraught with difficulties in the best of cases) should not be the primary evidence upon which to base our claims, new, more promising research agendas can be formulated. The key to progress in the reconstruction of ethnicity lies in the study of Jewish languages and ethnography.

One of the distinctive properties of language is that it retains traces of linguistic and cultural developments dating from periods that long predate the historical records of the speech communities. As far as the Jews of the Iberian Peninsula are concerned, we have fragmentary Latin and Greek inscriptions written by Jews from approximately the second half of the first millennium, with Arabic, Hebrew, and Ibero-Romance documentation beginning with the 10th century. As I will show in chapter 4, the absence of unequivocal historical documentation does not preclude utilizing linguistic data to reconstruct, at least *grosso modo*, the origins of these early Jewish settlers to the Iberian Peninsula, and to recommend a reconstruction of Sephardic history that so far has never been proposed by historians. The nonspecialist in linguistics may be surprised to learn that even contemporary Judeo-Spanish and Judeo-Arabic data can offer invaluable clues to the geographical and ethnic origins of the Sephardic

Jews; we are fortunate in possessing rich documentation of these two languages for the last several centuries, as well as an important secondary linguistic literature.

The Spanish-speaking Jews are a particularly inviting field of study for four reasons:

(a) They are the third largest Jewish group after the Ashkenazic and Arab Jews. (In speaking of “groups,” I am aware that no Jewish community is completely monolithic in culture or in ethnic origin. Still most groups had, at least historically, a common Jewish or Judaized language and often a belief in a common historical past that justifies positing separate groups of “Ashkenazic,” “Sephardic,” and even “Arab” Jews; though the latter, to be sure, do not always share common origins, even though they speak variants of a common language.)

(b) The Sephardim have had a strong cultural impact on co-territorial Arab and Balkan Jews, and on non-co-territorial Ashkenazim, via their religious literature.

(c) The history of the Iberian Jews has been intertwined with that of Arabic- and Berber-speaking Jews for almost as long as Jews have been attested on Iberian soil. Hence, revealing the origin of the Iberian Jews has immediate implications for the reconstruction of the historical origins of the North African Berber- and Arabic-speaking Jews as well.

(d) A sizeable body of primary and secondary literature has accumulated on the history, language, and folklore of the Iberian and North African Jews, which makes innovative research possible. For further discussion, see the bibliographies compiled by Singerman 1975, 1993, Bunis 1981, and Wexler 1989a.

I will argue in the following chapters that Sephardic Jewry was created when significant numbers of Romance-, Berber-, and Arabic-speaking proselytes to Judaism intermarried with a handful of descendants of Palestinian Jews in North Africa and on the Iberian Peninsula. This demographic and cultural merger took place cyclically—at three different historical periods in two venues:

(a) First, in North Africa in the 7th and early 8th century (pursuant to the Arab settlement of North Africa).

(b) Then, in the Iberian Peninsula between 711 and 1492 (the respective dates of the Muslim invasion, and the expulsion of the Jews from the Kingdom of Spain by the Christian monarchs).

(c) Finally, again in North Africa after 1391 (where Iberian Jews began to settle in large numbers as a result of the nation-wide pogroms against the Jews in the Iberian Peninsula). The bulk of Sephardic culture—Berber and Arab in origin—owes its formation to the early centuries of settlement of the Jews in the Iberian Peninsula, but subsequent mergers were not without significance. In the first act of merger, *non-Jews*, along with a minority Palestinian Jewish nucleus, played a dominant role in the formation of the Sephardic people; in the last two cases, it was the “Judaized” descendants of Arab, Berber, and Iberian converts to Judaism who merged into a homogeneous Jewish community. As I will discuss later, subsequent historical events have not supplanted all of the original North African Berbero-Arab cultural and linguistic patrimony of the Sephardic Jews, much of which dates back to the 8th century, even though the bulk of the Iberian Jews, by the time of their expulsion from Spain in 1492, were already monolingual speakers of Spanish, and imbued to varying degrees with Iberian Christian culture.

In order to ascertain the origins of the Iberian Jews, we first have to determine, beginning with the 8th century, the makeup of the North African populations that entered Spain and Portugal. Jewish migratory patterns rarely differ from those of the coterritorial non-Jews, except in cases where the Jews alone are subject to banishment. Linguists and historians have identified Berber and Yemenite (the latter includes South Arabian) substrata in Iberian Arabic. For further discussion, see especially E. Wagner 1966 and Corriente 1977, 1989 for linguistic examples. In chapter 2, I will show that the identical linguistic and ethnic components appear to have attended the formation of the Iberian Jews.

In North Africa, Arabic dialects, which were similar to those initially introduced into Spain after 711, would probably have long since become radically altered, if not entirely replaced, by the new forms of Arabic brought to North Africa in the wake of the Bedouin invasions of the 11th and 12th centuries. Hence, forms of the original North African Judeo-Arabic that were brought back from Spain by emigrés especially after 1391, are likely to shed light on colloquial Iberian and Old North African Arabic; most of the descendants of the Iberian Muslims, who

were “repatriating” to Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia up to the early 17th century, assimilated long ago to newer North African variants of Arabic, and are thus less useful than the Iberian Jews for reconstructing older forms of North African or Iberian Arabic.

A systematic comparison of North African Judeo-Arabic with the Spanish Arabic spoken and written by all religious groups would reveal which North African Judeo-Arabic dialects were possibly of immediate Iberian origin, and which Jewish dialects (along with all the coterritorial North African Muslim dialects) of Arabic developed *in situ* after the settlement of Spain. I suspect that the Judeo-Arabic of Algiers that was studied in detail by Marcel Cohen in 1912 may be of immediate Iberian origin. For similar suggestions, see Blanc 1964:110, 182, fn 2, 185, fn 20 and Niehoff-Panagiotidis 1994:533.

Up until now, our information about spoken Iberian Arabic has been gleaned almost entirely from contemporary grammars written by Christians and the enormous Arabic component embedded in Ibero-Romance. Written Arabic texts, being composed in Classical Arabic, tend to mask spoken reality. As far as I know, no Arabists have ever entertained the possibility that some dialects of North African Judeo-Arabic might provide valuable data for the reconstruction of the colloquial Arabic that was brought to Spain in the early 8th century.

An important future research goal should be the comparison of the Iberian linguistic and ethnographic patrimony of the Jews and Andalusian Muslims who settled in North Africa—the Jews between the late 14th and late 15th centuries, the Muslims between the 15th and 17th centuries (the last Spanish Muslim settlers to arrive in North Africa were speakers of Spanish). For example, the Arabic of the Iberian Muslims who settled on the Tunisian coast between Tunis and Bizerte became mixed with local dialectal features to produce a new regional dialect. Today there are only two locales near Bizerte which preserve an Andalusian form of Arabic. For further discussion, see Boughanmi et al., 1979:23, Zavadovskij 1979:18–19. The awareness of an Iberian origin among contemporary North African Muslims should also be mapped across North Africa. The first Iberian Jews to settle in North Africa after the pogroms of 1391 might still have included Arabic speakers, while those who came in 1492 were probably exclusively Spanish-speaking; for example, the *taqqanot* (regulations) of the Iberian Jewish community in Morocco, published in Fès in 1494, were composed in Hebrew and Judeo-Spanish (Anqawa 1871). This suggests, at least, that

the intelligentsia were Spanish-speaking. Corcos has suggested that *Hakitía* (the native glottonym for Moroccan Judeo-Spanish) was preserved in Tetuan because coterritorial Muslims also spoke Spanish up to the 18th century (1972:xxix); this would still not explain why *Hakitía* was preserved in other areas where Muslims did *not* speak Spanish. While North African Muslims of Iberian origin have generally lost awareness of their Iberian roots (Andalusian Muslim immigrants to North Africa who could speak only Spanish were not highly regarded in North Africa), the Jews have broadly preserved and cultivated their Iberian roots (Guershon 1993:19).

A major challenge for Jewish historical scholarship is to uncover the ethnographic and religious profile of Iberian Jewish society prior to its official dissolution in 1492. This is difficult to do in light of the sparse documentation, both Jewish and non-Jewish. A direct source of information is the rabbinical decisions that survive from Muslim and Christian Spain and North Africa between the 12th and 15th centuries. An indirect source is the Inquisition descriptions of the vestigial Jewish culture and religious practice among the *Marranos*—the body of Jews who converted to Catholicism, either by volition or under duress between the late 14th and late 15th centuries. Many *Marranos* developed clandestine syncretistic cultural and religious patterns that were derived from an idiosyncratic mix of Jewish and non-Jewish elements. Some of these unique cultural and religious patterns, still discernible among the contemporary descendants of *Marranos* in central and northern Portugal, Mallorca, the southwest of the United States, and possibly Latin America and the Caribbean, provide a means of evaluating the authenticity of the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisition pronouncements. For examples, as well as a discussion of the origin of the Spanish term *marrano*, see chapter 2 this volume. Also, Christian ecclesiastical literature of the 16th century occasionally rebukes “Old Christians” (i.e., Christians of non-Jewish or non-Muslim origins) for following allegedly “Jewish” and “Muslim” practices and superstitions (de Guevara 1541); scholars should study these materials systematically for the information they may provide on Iberian Jewish (and Muslim) practices. Finally, illuminations in Iberian Jewish books occasionally provide insights into Iberian Jewish society not readily available from written sources themselves.

The extant linguistic and ethnographic evidence from the two Iberian diasporas after 1492 is more voluminous and detailed than that of the pre-1492 period, yet serious problems of interpretation still remain. In

North Africa, the difficulty is how to differentiate Berbero-Arab linguistic and ethnographic features among the descendants of the Sephardim which are of Iberian origin, from subsequent influences acquired from the indigenous Arabic- and Berber-speaking Jews and Muslims after 1391—the date of the first mass resettlement of Iberian Jews in North Africa. In the Ottoman Empire, there is the difficulty of separating Iberian Islamic features in Sephardic culture and language from those which were borrowed, after 1492, from the coterritorial (Arabized) Turks.

Fortunately, the Iberian Jewish and Marrano exiles (the Jews were expelled en masse from Spain and Portugal between 1492 and 1498, while the Marranos left voluntarily as individuals throughout the 16th and early 17th centuries) initially settled in two geographically distinct areas that enjoyed minimal contact with one another: North Africa (modern-day Morocco, Algeria, and marginally Tunisia), and the Eastern Mediterranean successor states of the Ottoman Empire (the Balkans, Turkey, Arab Western Asia and, marginally, Egypt). The bifurcated settlement history permits us to claim that cultural features shared by North African and Balkan Sephardim are most likely of Iberian provenience. Linguistic and non-linguistic features found in only one of the Iberian Jewish diasporas (North Africa or the Balkans) might also be considered Iberian in origin and not post-1492 borrowings from the contiguous (non-)Jews, provided there are precedents in Iberian Jewish society as well. Fortunately, most later North African and Turkish linguistic and ethnographic features can be easily identified. Of course, not all pan-Sephardic features need have an Iberian source. For example, it is conceivable that pan-Arabic and Islamic influences were all acquired independently in Spain, North Africa, and the Balkans, or that a feature shared by both Sephardic diasporas could be of Iberian origin in one locale, but a local post-1492 borrowing in the other.

Many folk practices shared by Balkan and North African Sephardim have unmistakable North African Berber and/or Arab parallels; the Iberian origin of the former can be posited with some certainty whenever North African Jews, Berbers, and Arabs differ in the chronological or spatial details, or whenever Berber features surface in the Balkans, where there are no Berbers in the immediate environment. Since the Spanish Jews who settled in North Africa initially looked down upon the indigenous Jews, even to the point of accusing them of idolatry and religious fanaticism (Abbou 1953:380), and for a long time shunned intermarriage (this is the opposite of the low ranking that Andalusian Muslims enjoyed



in North Africa—discussed earlier), it is unlikely that they would have imitated North African Jewish customs that differed radically from their own in the early periods of settlement. Hence, I assume that North African Sephardic customs with parallels in the (Judeo-)Berber communities (of non-Iberian origin) need not necessarily have all been acquired from the latter in Africa after 1391. Ultimately, due to the sweeping migrational history of the Arabs and Arab Jews, it will be useful to compare the putative Arab and Berber imprint in the folk practices of the Sephardic Jews with cultural patterns throughout the entire North African area, and even beyond in Arabia and the Near East (Corso 1935:35); unfortunately, such an ambitious task will, for the most part, have to be left for the future.

An historical event that facilitates the interpretation of Sephardic ethnographic and linguistic evidence (both in Judeo-Spanish and Judeo-Arabic) is the invasion of North Africa by the banu Hilal and Ma'qil Bedouins in the mid-11th and 12th centuries. These invasions brought new linguistic and cultural patterns to North Africa that supplanted many of the earlier features that had been deposited by the first Arab invasion in the late 7th century or in Spain in the early 8th century. Not all the newer features succeeded in spreading to Islamic Spain. Hence, Spanish Arabic and Spanish Muslim culture may be more archaic than the North African counterparts. Linguistic and ethnographic differences among the Iberian and North African Jews will allow us to reconstruct to some extent the various waves of North African Jewish settlement in Spain, and later, Iberian Jewish settlement in North Africa. I would expect Iberian Jewish data to cast valuable light on the historical development of the Jewish communities in the Near East and the Arabian Peninsula as well. As far as I know, no scholar has ever proposed such a research agenda.

For example, there are some Arabic terms found among the Iberian Jews and their descendants outside the peninsula that are presently unknown in parts of North Africa. JSp *adefina* “sabbath food” < Ar *ad-dfina* “the burial,” is presently unattested in Morocco, but is found in the territory between Algeria and Libya; (J)Ar *šnūga* “synagogue” < Arabized Lat *synagōga*, known now only in a handful of points in Algeria and northeastern Morocco, is probably a loan from Judeo-Spanish. Conversely, North African Jews have Arabisms not attested among Iberian Jews. For example, JAr *šlā* “synagogue” < “prayer,” that is a pan-Afro-Asian semantic development among the Jews (and

encompasses numerous Judaized languages other than Arabic), is unknown in Spanish Arabic. I would tentatively ascribe *adefina* and *šnūga* to the first Berbero-Arab invasions of Spain anytime between the early 8th and the early 10th centuries, and *šlā* to the later Bedouin invasions of North Africa in the 11th and 12th centuries (see chapter 4 this volume).

All too often the history of the Jews is treated as an independent, self-contained topic, as if the Jews were a migrant Palestinian people that occasionally absorbed a number of linguistic and cultural influences from the coterritorial peoples—i.e., the Palestinian Jews became “Arabized,” “Berberized,” and “Iberianized/Christianized”—while managing to maintain their original identity throughout history. For further discussion, see, most recently, Johnson’s characterization of the Jews in this vein in 1987.

The relatively late transmission of written Hebrew and Judeo-Aramaic, as well as the Jewish liturgical literature (for example, the Hebrew Bible and Judeo-Aramaic Talmud) from Palestine and the Near East to Europe, convince me that many of the genuinely Old Palestinian Jewish traditions and religious lore of the contemporary Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews must be the result of more recent processes of “Judaization,” rather than uninterrupted inheritance from Palestine. By Judaization, I mean the process by means of which contemporary non-Jewish customs came to acquire Old Palestinian Jewish pedigrees by being linked to “precedents” in the Bible and Talmud (see chapter 5 this volume). Differences between the Sephardic pronunciation of Hebrew in Spain, and the diasporas, also point to serious breaks in the transmission of Iberian Jewish practices to the Balkan and North African diasporas after 1492. The successful implementation of Judaization means that only the end points of the time line of Jewish history share common patterns of behavior, for example, contemporary Jewish culture can resemble Old Palestinian Jewish culture more closely than it does the culture of the intervening periods. Such a picture suggests that the latest stage is unlikely to be a direct evolution from the first Palestinian stage.

If I am right that the Sephardic Jews are descended mainly from Berbers and Arabs, and only marginally from Old Palestinian Jews, then the Sephardim (and to some extent the North African Jews of Arab and Berber language and culture whose ancestors never sojourned in the Iberian Peninsula) may be priceless repositories of Old Berber and Arab cultural and linguistic patterns. In that case, the Sephardic Jews could offer a parallel to the Ashkenazim who retain Old Sorbian pre-Christian

and Christian ethnographic and religious patterns that have become obsolete among the few remaining Sorbs themselves (Wexler 1993c).

The reason that Sephardic Jews succeeded in retaining so much of their original Berbero-Arab ethnographic patrimony, even after separation from living Arab and Berber cultures, is that the latter could provide the Jews with a unique religious, cultural, and linguistic profile, which was, after all, one of the goals of the Judaization process. This first happened in Muslim Spain, when non-Jewish customs became obsolete in the coterritorial Berber culture due to the acceleration of Arabization, but not among the Jews; it occurred again in Christian Spain when the Jews began to seek a distinctly “Jewish” profile that could set them apart from all the surrounding non-Jews. In the Balkan and North African diasporas, the cultivation of the Berbero-Arab patrimony and the Spanish language could enable the Sephardic emigrés to continue to preserve a separate profile in proximity to indigenous non-Iberian Jewish and non-Jewish (including Berber) communities. In fact, since Spanish was not spoken by non-Jews at all in the Balkans, and only to a limited extent in the North African diaspora, the Sephardic Jews outside of Spain became less prone to cultivating specifically Judaized variants of Spanish. In North Africa, the Jews eventually replaced Judeo-Spanish (*Hakitía*) with standard Spanish in the early 20th century; even in the Balkans where there was no immediate Spanish stimulus, Judeo-Spanish periodically underwent transformations leading to convergence with standard Spanish (Bunis 1993a).

Whether we regard the Sephardic Jews as “Judaized” Arabs, Berbers, and Iberians, or as “Arabized, Berberized, and Iberianized” Palestinian Jews and their descendants, it is imperative that the history of the Sephardic Jews be studied in a cross-disciplinary framework that exploits the expertise of historians, linguists, and ethnographers, and takes care to study the Jews in a broad context that includes the coterritorial and contiguous non-Jewish groups. Collaboration of historians, archaeologists, and linguists is imperative since it is unlikely that much new historical or archaeological data of the Iberian Jewish presence in the first millennium will come to light that could radically alter our present views; moreover, linguistic data without corroborative historical and archaeological data usually offer insufficient underpinning for innovative theories.