

Samuele Rocca, *In the Shadow of the Caesars: Jewish Life in Roman Italy*, (*The Brill Reference Library of Judaism* – 74), Brill, Leiden–Boston 2023, 345 pp. + 52 b/w and color ills., ISSN 1571-5000; ISBN 978-90-04-51704-2

While the history of the Jewish presence in the capital of the Roman empire is fairly well studied,¹ we are far less familiar with the history of the Jewish communities across Italy. In spite of a wealth of individual publications on the subject, no comprehensive account exists on the history of the Jews of Italy: given the centuries-long presence of the Jewish diaspora in Italy, to write such a work poses a considerable challenge. Furthermore, the subject demands familiarity with a different types of sources, not equally abundant for all periods. Despite these hurdles, Samuele Rocca has risen to the challenge: his work caps several years of study on this subject, partial results of which he has previously presented in a series of publications (p. 1). The author’s ambition is to survey aspects of the history of the Jews in Roman Italy from the second half of the second century BCE (when the sources first mention their presence in Rome) up to the end of antiquity: one of his aims is to showcase the life of the Jewish community in Roman society and the attitudes of its members towards external threats, both political and cultural.²

The first chapter concerns the geographical distribution of Jews in Rome itself and the demographic growth of their community (“The Urban Geography and the Demographic Development of the Jewish Settlement in Imperial Rome: A Diachronic Overview,” pp. 16–71). Both of these aspects are examined by the author in relation to the Republican, Early Imperial and Late Antique periods. The first Jewish inhabitants of Rome (who appeared there during the Republican period) probably resided in the Subura district. Their numbers swelled when the Middle East came into the orbit of Roman politics. Following years of battles waged by a string of Roman commanders in Judea, more Jewish slaves flowed into Rome and Italy. Under the emperors of the Julian-Claudian dynasty, by virtue of the close relations between them and the vassal rulers of Judea, the Jewish population in Rome grew and somewhat gentrified, with many representatives of the Jewish elite flocking to the city (cf. pp. 39–41). The Jewish communities in Rome and across Italy grew again after Vespasian and Titus’ suppression of the uprising of the Jews in Judea, with the multitudes of Jewish prisoners of war being brought in from across the sea. Only for the 2nd century CE a more precise topography of the Jewish presence in

¹ See H. J. Leon, *The Jews of Ancient Rome*, Updated edition, Peabody, MA 1995; J. M. G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE–117 CE)*, Edinburgh 1996, 282–319.

² “. . . this research tried to find a satisfactory understanding of how the Jews answered to the challenges of Roman society, to investigate whether they strove to maintain a communal identity or whether their response to the pressure exercised on them by the outside world, as it were, led them to acculturate to or assimilate the values and behaviors of those other individuals and groups with whom they lived” (p. 3).

Rome becomes known, with the largest number of them residing in the Transtiberinum district. The earliest surviving documents testifying to the presence of Jewish communities in Italy, dated to the Early Imperial period, place them in several cities of northern, southern and central Italy (apart from Rome, in Ostia, Terracina, Naples, Pompeii and Puteoli), with some also found in Sicily. However, the more detailed evidence on them pertains to a much later period.

The second chapter (“The Legal Status of the Jews in Roman Italy,” pp. 72–129) addresses the legal status of the Jews in the Early and Late Imperial periods, with the author drawing comparisons with the Hellenistic period in order to characterize it. The question of the legal status of the Jews under the Roman emperors concerns not only the explicit position of their entire community under the Roman law but also a variety of supplementary regulations that governed organized forms of social life, such as admittance to a variety of *collegia*. The author has devoted a separate subsection to the evolving attitude of the Roman authorities towards Jewish conversion: from allowing conversion (to a limited extent) under the early emperors to its total prohibition, under threat of severe punishment, by the Christian emperors (pp. 117–129).

The third chapter (“Jewish Social Life in Roman Italy,” pp. 130–162) presents data on various aspects of the functioning of the Jewish community in Roman society, including that of name-giving. The author analyzed onomastic data from the area of Rome, the city of Venosa and Sicily, concluding that the majority of members of the Jewish communities in these centers named their children after the Roman fashion to let them blend with the bulk of the inhabitants of Rome and the Italian cities.³ The sources provide little data on the social careers of Italic Jews. In none of the known cases did representatives of the Jewish community living in Italy rise to the higher social strata of Rome, yet they did become successful in the Italic cities. In spite of their active participation in social life and their acceptance of behavior appropriate to Roman society, the Jews retained elements of their cultural and religious identity, as evidenced, for example, by the iconography of their tombstones.

In the fourth chapter (“Reframing Judaism in Roman Italy,” pp. 163–240), the author has comprehensively addressed issues related to the religious life and practices of Italic Jews. According to S. Rocca, the apologetic texts produced by Jewish authors within Rome and Italy (most importantly, by Josephus Flavius, plus other anonymous writers), written between the 1st and 4th centuries CE, most cogently encapsulate their attitude towards religious matters (pp. 163–180). The religious practice depends most on the language of the liturgy and its performers. The language of the Jewish liturgy has evolved over time, with initially dominant Greek being eclipsed by Latin during the Early Imperial period, to be supplemented by Hebrew from the 4th century CE. Nevertheless, Rocca underscores that the Jewish circles outside of Rome adopted an dualistic attitude on the liturgical languages. The lay faithful would be more likely to use commonplace Greek and Latin, while their spiritual leaders, upholding the tradition, promoted Aramaic and Hebrew. Subsequently, Justinian restricted the use of Aramaic and Hebrew: only the Torah could be read in Hebrew, while the study and use of Mishna was altogether prohibited. These

³ “The Jewish onomasticon clearly demonstrates that Jews were an integral part of the urban texture of ancient Rome as an immigrant group who wished to integrate into the surrounding society and ultimately to do so as citizens” (p. 141).


restrictions fell within the broader scheme of this emperor's policy towards the Jews. In the period after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, the liturgy was led by priests, their role dwindling due to their falling numbers. The situation improved with the appearance of rabbis, but the strength of the rabbinical influence varied across Italy. The preserved Jewish catacombs in Rome and Venosa provide an insight into burial practices, as well as into the manifestations of artistic activity related to decorating the catacombs with religiously-themed paintings. By juxtaposing the iconography of the paintings preserved in Pompeii, the Roman and Venosa catacombs, the author draws attention to the distinctive features of Jewish sepulchral art in different phases of its development (pp. 209–240).

The final, fifth chapter of the book ("The Jewish Revolt: Jews and Judaism in Roman Imperial Ideology," pp. 242–277) differs somewhat from the earlier chapters. Here the author presents the impact of Vespasian and Titus' victory in Judea upon the ideological content of the Flavian propaganda, as reflected in the coins they minted, in their Roman art and in their architecture. Numerous buildings constructed by the Flavians were either constructed with funds acquired in Judea (as commemorated by appropriate inscriptions) or referred to events in Judea through elements of their decoration. The vision of events presented by imperial propaganda was not without influence on the Roman perception of the Jews, as made evident by the works of Quintilian and, in particular, Martial.

The book is capped with a concise concluding section ("Conclusion: The History of Jews in Roman Italy," pp. 278–284), in which the author restates his most relevant conclusions on the history, social and religious life of the Jews in Rome and Italy.

This inherently generalized overview of the substance of S. Rocca's work can only signal a subset of the key issues discussed within, with the monograph including a wealth of other presented or analyzed topics. Only by reading this work in its entirety can one become acquainted with the sheer scope of matters discussed in it. Its lecture throws into sharp relief the incompleteness of our seemingly comprehensive knowledge of the history of the Jewish presence in Rome and Italy. If the large number of surviving Late Republican, Early and Late Imperial sources provide us with a fairly good insight into the fate of the Jewish subjects of Rome in these periods, then the scarcity of narrative sources from the 2nd century CE translates to our fairly limited knowledge of the fate of the Jews during that century. The author's elaborate panorama of the life of Jewish communities living in Rome and other Italian cities deserves recognition. S. Rocca compiled and employed an enormous database of sources and secondary literature, although the bibliography lacks some of the more recent publications on the subject. Arguably, certain conclusions of the author may be seen as founded on too weak a premise, but their verification will be a task for subsequent researchers. The comprehensive nature and sheer chronological scope of Rocca's work make it a must-read for all scholars interested in the history of the ancient Jewish communities on the Italian peninsula.

Edward Dąbrowa

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9324-9096>
Jagiellonian University in Kraków