



## The Importance of Agriculture in Medieval Jewish Life: The Case of Crete

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**Abstract** This article describes how Jews in medieval Crete were involved in, and knowledgeable about, agricultural practices. It pushes back against a persistent view in the scholarly literature that medieval Jews were alienated from the land, and that their disproportionate involvement in trade hastened the Commercial Revolution. The study attempts to show that Cretan Jews took halakhic strictures on agriculture seriously, and that, as a result, they farmed differently from their Greek Orthodox and Latin Christian peers. By examining Jewish texts from the Hellenic territories of the Venetian Republic, the article makes the case that stereotypes of Jews as merchants betrays abundant evidence that medieval Jews were deeply engaged in cultivating the land.

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It is a tenet of modern Jewish scholarship that Jews were scarcely involved in agriculture during the Middle Ages. As a prominent historian of the Jews put it: during this time “fundamental social trends... implacably operated in the direction of the gradual elimination of Jews from the soil.”<sup>1</sup> Another assumption holds that the Jews were “exclusively town-dwellers.”<sup>2</sup> Thesis statements of this ilk are not mere sound bites; they are the main themes in narratives that dominate our understanding of medieval Jewish history. Often, they accompany arguments advanced by historians of European economic history that Jews spurred the Commercial Revolution, since during that time “no other group concentrated its efforts on trade as thoroughly as the Jews.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Salo W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, 17 vols. (Philadelphia, 1952–), 12:28.

<sup>2</sup>Joshua Starr, “Jewish Life in Crete under the Rule of Venice,” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 12 (1942): 59–114, esp. 81; see also Joshua Holo’s claim that “the Jews were overwhelmingly urban,” in *Byzantine Jewry in the Mediterranean Economy*, ed. Joshua Holo (Cambridge, 2012), 1.

<sup>3</sup>Robert Lopez, *The Commercial Revolution of the Middle Ages 950–1350* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1971), 86. Lopez equates Jews with “international merchants” (p. 21) and notes that agriculture was “unattractive” to Jews (p. 61).

The view that Jews did not farm complements the notion that Jews created capitalism.<sup>4</sup>

Both contentions are misleading and in need of modification. Evidence from the Hellenic territories of the Venetian Republic, particularly late medieval Crete, modifies our understanding of pre-modern Jewish economic life. Analysis of the agro-economic life of Cretan Jewry, though a small diaspora, recasts outworn stories about progressive Jewish alienation from the land. It also challenges the claim that Jews were proto-capitalists.<sup>5</sup> Evidence from late medieval Crete demonstrates that Jews lived in the country. They farmed, and they farmed distinctively, in accordance with Jewish laws and customs. Cretan Jews—along with their co-religionists in contemporary southern Italy and eastern Spain—thought about agriculture not only in a practical sense, but also in terms of its halakhic guidelines and restrictions. Such concerns occupied an important place in the minds of learned medieval Jews and deserve to be noted.

Crete offers excellent evidence of Jewish thought regarding agriculture. When scholarly narratives about the Middle Ages are dominated by Jews' experiences in central or northern Europe, or in the Islamic world, we overlook the fact that Jews were agriculturalists, and misunderstand their overall role in the medieval economy. Jews did indeed dwell in cities.<sup>6</sup> And they may have participated in the Commercial Revolution. Still, shifting our gaze from the better-studied areas of medieval Jewish life to lesser-known Mediterranean contexts upends the assumption that Jews were the agents of modern capitalism. While some Jews undoubtedly did strengthen the European economy during the Middle Ages, this does not imply that all of them did, much less that Jews universally catalyzed medieval economic growth.

Dominant historiographical trends may have been sketched by various hands, but those hands display uncanny stylistic similarity. In scholarship on Jews in the Islamic world, we read that heavy land taxes under the early Islamic state converted a “predominantly agricultural Jewish population into

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<sup>4</sup>Maristella Botticini and Zvi Eckstein, *The Chosen Few: How Education Shaped Jewish History, 70–1492* (Princeton, 2012).

<sup>5</sup>Michael Toch has made a similar point for an earlier period. See his *The Economic History of European Jews: Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages* (Leiden, 2013), 4, in which he argues that the “notion of economic prowess of medieval Jews” is a “problematical assumption taken from the modern situation and projected back into the past.”

<sup>6</sup>For example, Kenneth R. Stow has presented incontrovertible evidence that Rhineland Jews were predominantly urban. See his “The Jewish Family in the Rhineland in the High Middle Ages: Form and Function,” *The American Historical Review* 92, no. 5 (1987): 1085–110, esp. 1097. Stow’s argument is based on evidence from the late eleventh to the late twelfth centuries.

a people of merchants, moneylenders, and artisans.”<sup>7</sup> In northern and central Europe, by contrast, Jewish deracination was not triggered by an onerous land-tax; Jews were attracted by charters of newly founded towns, and promises of juridical autonomy and physical protection by lay and ecclesiastical authorities. As such, they were led “to forsake agriculture and to enter domestic and international commerce, trade, finance, arts, and crafts.”<sup>8</sup> Especially in the wake of the tenth-century Bourgeois Revolution, as this same scholar put it, accelerated urbanization led to the “growing alienation of Jews from the natural world” that was “characteristic of Jewish life in the Middle Ages.”<sup>9</sup> In their emphasis on the inevitable, unidirectional, centripetal flight of Jews from country to city, these narratives bear more than superficial resemblance to older trends, dating back to Max Weber and Werner Sombart.<sup>10</sup>

The stress that recent historians of the Jews place on Jewish removal from the land during the Middle Ages, and their concomitant neglect of evidence concerning Jewish farming, are rooted in nineteenth-century historiographical orthodoxies. Heinrich Graetz, for example, in his monumental *History of the Jews* (1853–1875) scarcely mentions Jewish involvement in agriculture, and strains to avoid depicting Jews as peasants. Regarding Jews in the thirteenth-century Kingdom of Naples during the reign of Frederick II he concedes “it is true that he [Frederick] permitted those who had come to Sicily from Africa. . . to take up their residence under his sway.” But Graetz goes on to stress that the *Stupor mundi*

burdened the Jewish immigrants with heavy imposts and restricted them to agricultural pursuits. He, indeed, promised his ‘*servi camerae*’ especial protection, but nevertheless he treated them as a despised race of human beings. Henceforth the three powers of

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<sup>7</sup>Nachum Gross, ed., *Economic History of the Jews* (New York, 1975), 25. See also Marina Rustow, “Baghdad in the West: Migration and the Making of Medieval Jewish Traditions,” *AJS Perspectives* (Fall 2010): 11–13. An important corrective to this argument may be found in Phillip I. Ackerman-Lieberman, “Revisiting Jewish Occupational Choice and Urbanization in Iraq under the Early Abbasids,” *Jewish History* 29 (2015): 113–35.

<sup>8</sup>Hava Tirosh-Samuels, “Judaism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (Oxford, 2006), 25–64, esp. 29.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup>Weber claimed that exile “transformed the Jews from a people with a fixed territory to an alien people, and their ritual thenceforth prohibited fixed settlement on the land. A strict adherent to the Jewish ritual could not become an agriculturalist.” As a result, and as nineteenth- and twentieth-century anti-Semitic discourse demonstrates, the Jews became “a pariah people of the cities,” Max Weber, *General Economic History* (New York, 1927), 196. Similarly, Sombart opined that “all that we know of Jewish life in the diaspora points to the conclusion that only an insignificant number of Jews devoted themselves to agriculture even in those lands where no difficulties were placed in their path,” Werner Sombart, *Jews and Modern Capitalism* (London, 1913), 333–34.

Christianity, the princes, the Church, and the people, combined to utterly destroy the feeblest of nations.<sup>11</sup>

Graetz was proud of Jews as an urban people, but ashamed of their rural lives. They practiced agriculture only when “restricted” to it, and, in his telling, Jews’ status as protected subjects (*servi camerae regis*) is misleadingly cast as demeaning.<sup>12</sup>

In modern historiography of the Jews after Graetz, the tone is consonant. Yitzhaq Baer took pains to differentiate Jews from their neighbors of other faiths in Spain after the twelfth-century *reconquista*. While Iberia presents a unique case, Baer’s ideas are representative of dominant scholarly trends: “Jews, unlike Christians and Muslims, were not yet entirely removed from the soil, but their attachment to it was not of the same nature as that of their neighbors, who were, for the most part, peasants.” When Baer does acknowledge Jewish landedness, he stresses Jews’ commercial endeavors: “Jews established themselves in other parts of [Spain] as farmers, who engaged in handicraft and commerce as well. They thus fall into that social class which laid the foundation of urban life in Europe.”<sup>13</sup>

To what can we attribute this profound reticence to admit that more medieval Jews held plows and pruning shears than bills of sale? The scholars of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were primarily conservative and apologetic, determined to underscore Jewish contributions to Western culture, and undermine hints of Jews’ traditional occupations or irrational thought.<sup>14</sup> The scholarship produced by the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* inserts Jews into the role of early capitalists; concomitant discomfort with the idea of Jews as peasants working the land is thus not hard to understand. Jewish merchant activity in the

<sup>11</sup>Heinrich Graetz, *History of the Jews*, 6 vols. (Philadelphia, 1901–1902), 3:569.

<sup>12</sup>On Frederick II’s use of the term *servi camerae regis*, as well as his attitude to the Jews more generally, see David Abulafia, “Il mezzogiorno peninsulare dai bizantini all’espulsione,” in *Gli ebrei in Italia*, ed. Corrado Vivanti (Turin, 1996), 5–44. On this phrase in the Middle Ages more generally, see David Abulafia, “The Servitude of Jews and Muslims in the Medieval Mediterranean: Origins and Diffusion,” *Mélanges de l’École Française de Rome* 112, no. 2 (2000): 687–714.

<sup>13</sup>Yitzhak Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1992 [orig. English translation 1961]), 1:79. More recent work on Jews in medieval Spain has acknowledged their involvement in agriculture. See, for example, Mark Meyerson, *A Jewish Renaissance in Fifteenth-Century Spain* (Princeton, 2004).

<sup>14</sup>Michael A. Meyer, *The Origins of the Modern Jew: Jewish Identity and European Culture in Germany, 1749–1824* (Detroit, 1967); Ismar Schorsch, *From Text to Context: The Turn to History in Modern Judaism* (Waltham, MA, 1994).

Middle Ages flattered the bourgeois assumptions of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Western and Central Europeans.<sup>15</sup>

More recent scholarship is less ideological, but still largely ignores Jews involved in agriculture.<sup>16</sup> Medieval Jews are sometimes portrayed as people who did not consider agriculture a “worthwhile activity.”<sup>17</sup> One explanation for this ambivalence is that much contemporary scholarship is driven by a preference for literary and documentary sources that are urban in provenance and content. Evidence that Jews worked the land and related to it through a prism carved by religious law seldom features in dominant historiography.<sup>18</sup> Historians of the Jews are more used to writing about—and reading—documentary sources that reflect topics not directly tied to land: social challenges, ritual observances, communal regulations. One effect of this scholarly trend is to create the impression that medieval Jews scarcely existed outside of cities. But cities were not the only stage for Jewish life. Communal ordinances, such as those from medieval Crete, rabbinic responsa, and le-

<sup>15</sup>Moritz Güdemann, *Geschichte des Erziehungswesens und der Cultur der abendländischen Juden während des Mittelalters und der neueren Zeit*, 3 vols. (Vienna, 1880–1888 [repr. Amsterdam 1966]), 2:239–40, writes that Jews in the medieval Kingdom of Naples “increased soil productivity” (von grossem Belang war der Einfluss der Juden auf die Hebung der Bodencultur). This apologetic stance is by no means restricted to the nineteenth century. According to Baron, Jews are credited with “early medieval pioneering contributions to European agriculture.” See Salo W. Baron, “Economic History,” in *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 2007), 6:109. To Luigi Falcone, Jews were responsible for the “re-introduction of olive-growing in Calabria after an era of grave decline”: Luigi Falcone, “Ebrei a Bisignano dal X al XVI secolo,” *Rivista Storica Calabrese* 4 (1983): 213–29, esp. 216. For a similar argument about Spain, see Norman Roth, *Jews, Visigoths and Muslims in Medieval Spain: Cooperation and Conflict* (Leiden, 1994), 152. Amat di S. Filippo, who acknowledges that Jews in Spain and Aragonese Sardinia farmed, nevertheless opens his chapter on Jews in Sardinia by stating that “the Jews in the Middle Ages were money changers, merchants, and contractors”: Amat di S. Filippo, *Del commercio e della navigazione dell’isola di Sardegna nei secoli xiv e xv* (Cagliari, 1865), 55.

<sup>16</sup>On how Marx and Sombart (who maintain that the Jew possesses inherent “Nomadism” or “Saharism”) continue to influence more “sober scholars,” see Toch, *Economic History of European Jews*, 5, as well as Michael Toch, “Jews and Commerce: Modern Fancies and Medieval Realities,” in *Il ruolo economico delle minoranze in Europa. sec XIII–XVIII*, ed. Simonetta Cavaciocchi (Florence, 2000). Reprinted in Michael Toch, *Peasants and Jews in Medieval Germany* (Aldershot, 2003).

<sup>17</sup>David Romano, “Judíos hispánicos y mundo rural,” *Sefarad* 51 (1991): 353–67, esp. 367.

<sup>18</sup>There are, of course, exceptions, and scholars of Jewish life in antiquity have done important work with evidence from epigraphic, architectural, and artistic sources. Several studies emphasize how the ancient synagogue of Rehov demonstrates Jewish interest in agricultural law and practice. See Ze’ev Safrai, “The Rehov Inscription,” *Immanuel* 8 (1978): 48–57; Jacob Sussman, “The Inscription in the Synagogue at Rehov,” in *Ancient Synagogues Revealed*, ed. Lee I. Levine (Jerusalem, 1981), 143–56. I am grateful to John Mandsager for these references.

gal compilations show that agricultural concerns are not simply background noise. Rural life is part of Jewish life.

There are a few notable exceptions to this trend in scholarship of focusing exclusively on urban Jews.<sup>19</sup> Half a century ago, the French historian Bernhard Blumenkranz saw it as “truly astonishing that, in all the economic histories, there is so much attention paid to Jewish merchants and so little paid to Jewish farmers, for our documentation on the latter is much richer than that of the former.”<sup>20</sup> Indeed we have plenty of evidence that medieval Jews owned land, farmed it, and were engaged in a variety of agricultural pursuits.<sup>21</sup> While Blumenkranz was concerned with continental Europe from the fifth century through the First Crusade, the High and Late Middle Ages offer evidence at least as abundant, and even more compelling.

One bundle of such evidence comes from the Hellenic territories of the Venetian Republic.<sup>22</sup> In Byzantium throughout the Middle Ages, agrarian pursuits occupied a majority of the population.<sup>23</sup> Throughout the Empire, and in Venetian Crete as well, Jews could pursue any profession. They also owned land.<sup>24</sup> Still, historiography on Jews in Byzantium equates them with mercantile activity.<sup>25</sup> In reality, Jewish economic life was quite diverse. For example, Jews raised sheep and herded goats on the Peloponnese in the four-

<sup>19</sup>See the recent work of Michael Toch cited above, n. 5.

<sup>20</sup>Bernhard Blumenkranz, *Juifs et Chrétiens dans le monde occidental 430–1096* (Paris, 1960), 22.

<sup>21</sup>For southern Italy, see the numerous examples noted by Attilio Milano, “Vicende economiche degli Ebrei nell’Italia meridionale ed insulare durante il medioevo,” *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel* 20 (1954): 76–89, 110–22, 155–74, 217–22, 276–81, 322–31, 372–84, 433–41, esp. 434.

<sup>22</sup>On Jews in the Venetian *stato da mar*, see the articles collected in *Mediterranean Historical Review* 27, no. 2 (2012), and Benjamin Arbel’s “Introduction,” *ibid.*, 117–28.

<sup>23</sup>Holo, *Byzantine Jewry in the Mediterranean Economy*, 207.

<sup>24</sup>The only restriction on Jewish landownership dealt with estates belonging to the church. See Andrew Sharf, *Byzantine Jewry: From Justinian to the Fourth Crusade* (London, 1971). On occupational freedom, see David Jacoby, “The Jews in the Byzantine Economy (Seventh to Mid-Fifteenth Century),” in *Jews in Byzantium: Dialectics of Minority and Majority Cultures*, ed. Robert Bonfil, Oded Irshai, Guy G. Stroumsa, and Rina Talgam (Leiden, 2012), 219–55, esp. 221. See also Joshua Starr, *The Jews in the Byzantine Empire, 641–1204* (Athens, 1939), 27.

<sup>25</sup>Evelyne Patlagean, “Byzance et les marchés du grand commerce, vers 830-vers 1030,” in *Mercati e mercanti nel alto medioevo, l’area Euroasiatica e l’area Mediterranea* (Spoleto, 1993), 586–629, esp. 610–12, in which she opens her discussion of merchants with evidence regarding Jews. This is by no means unique to Byzantine studies: in the index under “Jews,” in Georges Duby, *Rural Economy and Country Life in the Medieval West*, trans. Cynthia Postan (Columbia, SC, 1968 [orig. 1962]), there are only two entries and then the column reads: “see also moneylenders.”

teenth and fifteenth centuries.<sup>26</sup> Throughout the Byzantine Empire, and in Venice's newly conquered territories, Jews pursued a number of agricultural endeavors, and may have contributed extensively to Crete's agricultural economy.<sup>27</sup> One of the most conspicuous of those endeavors was viticulture. Because wine played an important role as both a vital nutriment and an essential element in Jewish ritual, Jews produced enough to satisfy their needs and often generated a surplus, which they sold to other Jewish communities, and even to non-Jews.

Of all Venice's Hellenic territories, Crete hosted the largest Jewish population.<sup>28</sup> The documentation is, accordingly, rich. In the years following the Fourth Crusade (1204) and the Venetian conquest of the Mediterranean's fourth-largest island, historical sources that shed light on the lives of Jews there become more abundant. One of the richest sources we have for Jewish life on Crete is a collection of lay ordinances assembled by the sixteenth-century rabbi and historian Elia Capsali, and published in the mid-twentieth century by Artom and Cassuto as *Takkanot Kandiyah*.<sup>29</sup> The *Takkanot Kandiyah* reflect many aspects of Jewish life on Crete: liturgical,

<sup>26</sup>Joshua Starr, *Romania: The Jewries of the Levant after the Fourth Crusade* (Paris, 1949), 65. See the primary documents in Constantin N. Sathas, *Documents inédits relatifs à l'histoire de la Grèce au Moyen Age* (Μνημεία Ελληνικής Ιστορίας), 9 vols. (Paris, 1880–1890), 4:127f (*Statuto di corone e modone*). Ignacy Schnipper compared Greek Jews with their coreligionists in Southern Italy and Sicily, who have an “affinity to agriculture,” in Ignacy Schnipper, *Toledot ha-Kalkalah ha-Yehudit* (Tel Aviv, 1935–1936), 1:158.

<sup>27</sup>See Zvi Ankori, “Jews and the Jewish Community in the History of Medieval Crete,” Περγαμμένα τοῦ β' διεθνοῦς Κρητολογικοῦ Συνεδρίου (Proceedings of the Second International Congress of Cretan Studies), 3 vols. (Athens, 1968), 3:312–67; Zvi Ankori, “From Zudecha to Yahudi Mahallesi: The Jewish Quarter of Candia in the Seventeenth Century,” in Salo Wittmayer Baron, *Jubilee Volume on the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday*, 3 vols., ed. Saul Lieberman (Jerusalem, 1975), 63–127, esp. 80; Gert Ziegler, *Wirtschaftsgeschichte, wirtschaftliche Struktur und Entwicklung der Insel Kreta* (n.p., 1943), which notes Jewish agricultural activities.

<sup>28</sup>Israel Lévi, “Les Juifs de Candie,” *Revue des Études Juives* 26 (1893): 198–208. For a more detailed study, see Joshua Starr, “Jewish Life in Crete under the Rule of Venice,” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 12 (1942): 59–114. Most recently, see the work of Rena Lauer, “Venice's Colonial Jews: Identity, Community, and Justice in Late Medieval Venetian Crete” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2014). For the period between 1380 and 1485, Jews constituted about five percent of the Cretan population. See Lévi, “Les Juifs de Candie,” 200.

<sup>29</sup>Elias S. Artom and Humbertus M. D. Cassuto, eds., *Takkanot Kandiyah ve-Zikhronoteha (Statuta Iudaeorum Candiae eorumque memorabilia)* (Jerusalem, 1943). Henceforth TK. The most recent work on these ordinances is Martin Borysek: “*Takkanot Kandiyah: A Collection of Legislative Statutes as a Source for the Assessment of Laymen's Legal Authority in a Jewish Community in Venetian Crete*” (PhD diss., Cambridge University, 2015). I thank Dr. Borysek for sharing his work with me.

administrative, financial. They also demonstrate the extent of Jewish involvement in agriculture and testify to the presence of rural Jewish populations. These documents indicate that Cretan Jews herded cattle, goats, and sheep; produced and sold cheese; and puzzled over the botanical nomenclature of fibers used to sew garments. Crete's economy was primarily rural, and the boundaries between city and country were porous.<sup>30</sup> Cretan Jews spent time in fields, vineyards, and on small dairies: this Jewish diaspora offers evidence for the particularity of Jewish agriculture in the later Middle Ages.

The presence of Jews in rural parts of Crete may have been essential for the economic and religious livelihood of the community, but it also produced tensions. The *Takkanot Kandiyah* reveal that Cretan Jews who lived in cities scorned Jews who lived in the countryside and mistrusted their scrupulousness in matters of ritual. One example of this is an ordinance concerning the "evil custom" of "dissolute men": the production and sale of ritually forbidden cheese. The authors of this 1363 ordinance excoriate the Jews of Castelnuovo, a small town on the fertile Messara plain renowned for its excellent goat cheese,<sup>31</sup> as "vain and light men, lacking Torah and meritorious deeds," who "stagger because of strong drink,"<sup>32</sup> "overturn the law," and "tear off from upon themselves the yoke of our Torah and its commentaries as we received them from the Oral Torah of our sages, of blessed memory, wise men of truth." The charge against them was simple and damnatory: "These people of Castelnuovo bring cheese that they purchase from country towns in the mountains and hills and sell that ritually impure cheese to the community under the presumption of [it being] pure." These "dissolute men," in the eyes of Crete's lay leadership, do more than simply purvey forbidden products: they "defile the pure souls in our community and in Jewish communities in other places."<sup>33</sup>

Castelnuovo was a small settlement, and, as its name indicates, was a new hamlet. Built by the Genoese Enrico Pescatore as a garrison during his rule over large sections of the island from 1206 to 1212, Jews lived there throughout the thirteenth and into the fourteenth century. They served as middlemen between peasants who grew food, produced wine, and raised livestock, on the

<sup>30</sup>Freddy Thiriet, "Villes et campagnes en Crète vénitienne aux XIVe–XVe siècles," in *Études sur la Romanie greco-vénitienne (Xe–XVe siècles)*, ed. Freddy Thiriet (London, 1977), 447–59, esp. 447, and works by Peruccio, Ratajczak, and Faivre cited there.

<sup>31</sup>David Jacoby, "Jews and Christians in Venetian Crete: Segregation, Interaction, and Conflict," in *Interstizi: Culture ebraico-cristiane a Venezia e nei suoi domini dal medioevo all'età moderna*, ed. Uwe Israel, Robert Jütte, and Reinhold C. Mueller (Rome, 2010), 243–79, esp. 251.

<sup>32</sup>Isa. 28:7.

<sup>33</sup>TK #37, 27–28.

one hand, and Jewish consumers and merchants in Candia on the other.<sup>34</sup> By the mid-fourteenth century there were very few Jews living in Castelnuovo, and, according to a leading scholar of Cretan Jewry, they were not trusted by other Jews on the island.<sup>35</sup>

The punishments for the nefarious act of selling ritually impure cheese were various, ranging from “a stiff fine” to the outright ban on all cheese whose provenance was Castelnuovo or its hinterland, unless the cheesemonger is “certified in advance before the seven officers [of the Jewish community in Candia].” Those who sold forbidden cheese were publicly shamed: the officers of the community “will cause it to be proclaimed throughout the camp<sup>36</sup> of Israel, and they shall announce the disgraceful, premeditated sin which he did in full consciousness of doing wrong—to feed Jews defective cheese.”<sup>37</sup>

Why was cheese so important? For one thing Crete supplied a lot of it. Along with wine, wheat, barley, and leather, cheese was among the products that Venice demanded from its new colony.<sup>38</sup> Cretan cheese was also in demand throughout Europe,<sup>39</sup> and by the early fourteenth century it was exported in bulk.<sup>40</sup> Travelers to Crete throughout the Middle Ages frequently mention the ubiquity and quality of cheese. The Irish monk Symon Simeonis, for example, who arrived in Chania in 1322, noted that Crete abounded in cheese and excellent wine, and that ships and galleys in the port were laden with it.<sup>41</sup> The sixteenth-century Spanish traveler Juan Cerverio de Vera noted that “the Cretans are very poor and live practically on their goats alone, which

<sup>34</sup>Jacoby, “Jews and Christians in Venetian Crete,” 243–79, esp. 252–53.

<sup>35</sup>David Jacoby, “Cretan Cheese: A Neglected Aspect of Venetian Medieval Trade,” in *Medieval and Renaissance Venice*, ed. Ellen E. Kittel and Thomas F. Madden (Urbana-Chicago, 1999), 49–68.

<sup>36</sup>Exod. 36:6.

<sup>37</sup>TK, 28.

<sup>38</sup>Aleida Paudice, *Between Several Worlds: The Life and Writings of Elia Capsali* (Munich, 2010), 18.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 1.

<sup>40</sup>Angeliki E. Laiou, “Quelques observations sur l’économie et la société de Crète vénitienne (ca. 1270–ca. 1305),” *Bisanzio e l’Italia: raccolta di studi in memoria di Agostino Pertusi* (Milan, 1982), 175–98, esp. 182.

<sup>41</sup>For a collection of travelers’ writings about Crete in this period, see Democratia Hemmerdinger Iliadou, “La Crète sous la domination vénitienne et lors de la conquête turque (1322–1684). Renseignements nouveaux ou peu connus d’après les pèlerins et les voyageurs,” *Studi veneziani* 9 (1967): 535–623. “Vino excellentissimo et caseo abundantior... in ipsa naves et galee, caseo onustantur” (p. 551).

furnish them with milk, meat, and cheese.”<sup>42</sup> Cheese was a crucial element of the Cretan diet, and a lynchpin of its economy.

For Cretan Jews the production and sale of cheese, a staple protein, generated contentious debates about its ritual fitness for consumption. Wine, no less important in the Cretan diet—to say nothing of its role in promoting sociability and fulfilling ritual requirements—appears frequently in these pages. More specifically, the *Takkanot Kandiyah* present Cretan Jews as viticulturists. One mid-fourteenth century ordinance provides evidence that Jews trod grapes and supervised the production of wine.<sup>43</sup> This episode in the life of Cretan Jewry illustrates how Jews interacted with Christians in the countryside as well as in the more familiar locations of cities and towns. It also demonstrates the centrality of Jewish law in Jews’ economic and gastronomic life.<sup>44</sup>

Wine was central to all Cretans, not merely to the island’s Jews. Numerous medieval travelers to Crete note the quality and quantity of its wine.<sup>45</sup> In the medieval Cretan economy, wine and winemaking constituted “the essential occupation and without doubt the most remunerative.”<sup>46</sup> As the common expression amongst the Venetians in Crete went: “vinum est. . . generalis respiratio.”<sup>47</sup> Simply put, wine shaped the Cretan economy during the Venetian occupation.<sup>48</sup> Wine was so important to Venetians and Cretans alike that the increase in its production had a number of ancillary effects: an increase in animal husbandry and cheese production; growth of the timber industry (needed to build barrels, since Cretan wine was sold and shipped along with its container); even alteration in ship construction, as larger hulls were needed to accommodate wine exports.<sup>49</sup> During the later Middle Ages, so much arable land was dedicated to vineyards that Venetian officials recognized it as an acute problem: due to the mania for Cretan wines, Crete could no longer grow enough wheat to feed itself, much less to export.<sup>50</sup> In 1574, the *provveditore*

<sup>42</sup>I translate from the 1595 French version of de Vera’s text: Juan Cerverio de Vera, *Viage de la Tierra Santa y descripcion de Jerusalem* (Rome, 1596). See Iliadou, “La Crète sous la domination vénitienne,” 596.

<sup>43</sup>TK #33, 22–25.

<sup>44</sup>See Benjamin Arbel, “The ‘Jewish Wine’ of Crete,” in *Μονεμβάσιος οίνος, Μοβοβας (ι)ά – Malvasia*, ed. Ilias Anagnostakis (Athens, 2008), 81–88.

<sup>45</sup>See, inter alia, the sources cited by Iliadou on pp. 572, 593, and 606.

<sup>46</sup>Thiriet, “Villes et campagnes en Crète vénitienne,” 450.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 450, n. 17.

<sup>48</sup>Ugo Tucci, “Il commercio del vino nell’economia cretese,” in *Venezia e Creta*, ed. Gherardo Ortalli (Venice, 1998), 183–206, esp. 183.

<sup>49</sup>Tucci, “Il commercio,” 188, 186, 185, respectively.

<sup>50</sup>A sad irony, given that Buondelmonti, writing after 150 years of Venetian domination, called Crete “fertilissima,” and that in official Venetian records throughout the Middle Ages Crete

(overseer) Giacomo Foscarini sent a desolate report back to Venice. Lamenting that a cash crop had supplanted a staple crop, he implored Venetian authorities to draft legislation to promote wheat-growing and prevent the planting of vines.<sup>51</sup> The passion for Cretan wines led to dramatic shifts in the island's landscape and economic priorities.<sup>52</sup> Jews shared a characteristically Cretan devotion to the grape. The ritually permissible wine they produced was not only intended for Jewish consumption, but also sold to Gentiles.<sup>53</sup>

The quality and popularity of ritually permitted wine on Crete meant it was an important economic commodity. Accordingly, the lay leadership of the Jewish community took steps to regulate its production.<sup>54</sup> The general problem, as they perceived it, was that Jews were not properly supervising the treading of grapes and the production of must. The authors of the ordinance “agree to ordain concerning the subject of treading wine and must at the time of harvest, lest it become forbidden [by the manipulation of a Gentile suspected of dedicating it to idolatrous purposes].”<sup>55</sup> According to Jewish law, wine becomes unfit for consumption by Jews in either of two ways. First, if it is improperly handled by a Gentile at certain phases of its production or transport it loses its status as *kasher*.<sup>56</sup> Second, as this text indicates, if it is touched by “a Gentile suspected of dedicating it to idolatrous purposes”—such as communion wine in church—Jews are not permitted to drink it or derive any benefit from it.<sup>57</sup> This legal requirement necessitates Jewish involvement in the production process so as to ensure the wine's legal fitness for consumption.<sup>58</sup>

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was understood to be “copiosa et fertilis biadis.” See Mario Gallina, *Una società coloniale del trecento: Creta fra Venezia e Bisanzio* (Venice, 1989), 23–26. For an edition of Buondelmonti, see Marie-Anne van Spitael, *Descriptio insule crete et liber insularum, Cap XI: Creta* (Heraklion, 1981).

<sup>51</sup>Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana di Venezia (BMV Ms It VII, n. 631 a [= 7476], ff. 65v-66r). See also Marcello-Zon, ed., *Relazione di Domenico Marcello ritornato di Consigliere di Candia, delle condizioni di quell regno: 1574, 3 maggio* (Venice, 1858). Quoted in Gallina, *Una società coloniale del trecento*, 138.

<sup>52</sup>For more on the commercialization of the Cretan economy under Venetian rule, see Laiou, “Quelques observations,” 182–83.

<sup>53</sup>See, for example, a contract from April 20, 1357, wherein Moses and his son Yehudah Carvuni strike a deal for “boni vini iudaici” with Nicholaus Gligoropulo and Leo Turco: Antonino Lombardo, ed., *Zaccaria de Fredo: Notaio in Candia (1352–1375)* (Venice, 1968), document #94, pp. 68–69.

<sup>54</sup>See David Malkiel, “Gentile Wine and Italian Exceptionalism,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 68, no. 2 (2017), 346–68, esp. 362–64.

<sup>55</sup>TK #33, 22.

<sup>56</sup>BT ‘Avodah Zarah 74r.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 55r.

<sup>58</sup>On wine in medieval Jewish law and culture, see Haym Soloveitchik, ‘Yenam’: *sahar be-yenam shel goyim ‘al gilgulah shel halakhah be-’olam ha-ma’aseh* (Tel Aviv, 2003);

Although a substantial amount of agricultural work could be carried out inside medieval cities and towns, it was a Cretan custom to produce must at the vineyard—or *super patirio*, in the language of legal documents.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, the difficulty and expense of transporting freshly harvested grapes provided further incentive to tread them in or near the vineyards. In other words, wine production was a rural activity.<sup>60</sup> “The majority of” ritually permissible wine, in the words of this ordinance’s authors, “comes from country towns and distant districts in our surroundings.” As the active involvement of Gentiles would render the wine undrinkable for Jews, Jews had to perform the central productive tasks. Due to economic, geographical, and ritual considerations, most Cretan Jews lived in the island’s major ports—Heraklion, Rethymno, Chania—and mid-sized towns such as Castelnuovo and Castelbonifacio.<sup>61</sup> Still, an influx of urban Jews migrated to the countryside: “those who tread [in] wine vats are Jews who are sent to those country towns.”<sup>62</sup> This ordinance indicates that there was a Jewish presence in the Cretan countryside, even if only a seasonal one.

In the Cretan countryside, Jews encountered non-Jews. In fact, as David Jacoby has argued, “in many areas the growing of grapes, their harvest, and the actual production of wine. . . [was] largely, if not entirely, performed by Christians.”<sup>63</sup> The relationship between Greek Christians and the island’s Jews was not always congenial. We hear of Jews’ fear of “the Greeks who say to [them] ‘go away, unclean one!’ Who cry out to them ‘go away, do not touch, and do not tread grapes in accordance with the law of the sages of Israel!’”<sup>64</sup> Such taunting may have been facilitated or tolerated by a quirk in the way justice was administered on Crete. Cretan Jews would have had recourse to the Venetian criminal justice system, but only in urban jurisdictions. Venetian justice did not extend to rural parts of Crete, where customary law reigned, and Byzantine traditions dominated well into the period of Venetian occupation.<sup>65</sup> Whatever the seriousness of the strife between Jewish and

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Haym Soloveitchik, *ha-Yayin bi-yeme ha-benayim: perek be-toldot ha-halakhah be-Ashkenaz* (Jerusalem, 2008).

<sup>59</sup>Thiriet, “Villes et campagnes en Crète vénitienne,” 456, n. 41.

<sup>60</sup>Though we cannot know the exact setting for this ordinance, we may presume that it was close to a city, given that most wine production takes place near cities, where it was easier to procure dung as fertilizer. Tucci, “Il commercio,” 189.

<sup>61</sup>A wealth of information, including demographic and topographic details, may be found in Nicholas de Lange, Alexander Panayotov, and Gethin Rees, *Mapping the Jewish Communities of the Byzantine Empire* (2013), available at [www.byzantinejewry.net](http://www.byzantinejewry.net).

<sup>62</sup>TK, 22.

<sup>63</sup>Jacoby, “The Jews in the Byzantine Economy,” 228.

<sup>64</sup>TK, 22.

<sup>65</sup>Gallina, *Una società coloniale del trecento*, 12–13.

Christian agricultural workers, it is clear that it was sufficient to deter Jews from discharging their duties. Even though Jews migrated to the countryside to perform viticultural labor, their mere presence was not enough to ensure that they completed the job in a ritually exacting manner. Further steps had to be taken: only pious Jews could perform these key tasks.

That there was a need to differentiate between Jewish agricultural workers signals several things. First, the taunts and jeers that Greek Christians tossed at Jewish grape-treaders must have been effective in urging them to cease their activities—or at least to perform them with ritual laxity. Second, this vignette indicates a cleavage in Cretan Jewish society between those who were likely to be lax in their performance of ritual acts, and those who were more steadfast in the face of social or economic pressure. The gravity of the situation, signaled by its financial stakes, is made plain in the ordinance. “We agree and decree,” the authors intone, “on penalty of a fine, that anyone who wishes to make ritually permissible wine at the time of the grape pressing, whether they be from the outskirts of the city or from country towns near or far, employ ‘good Jews’ to tread and guard his wines, and that he not rely on ignorant youngsters, empty-headed folk who do not know how to pray.”<sup>66</sup>

Treading grapes is physically demanding work, best suited to the young and energetic: it necessitates stomping through a viscous, thick, sticky substance for long periods of time. It is aerobically challenging. Furthermore, it threatens podiatric health: crushing grapes means exposing your feet and lower extremities to seeds, twigs, and other sharp objects. That risk-pursuant teenagers would be prone to engage in this labor is not surprising. Their religiosity was of concern to the authors of this ordinance: they wished that licit grape-treaders “knew how to pray,” not just how to stomp. These remarks may reflect social as well as religious concerns: the ruling class who produced the *Takkanot Kandiyah* wished to promote intergenerational continuity and exercise their power and influence in communal matters.<sup>67</sup>

The process of wine production offered numerous opportunities for non-Jews to make contact with the grapes, the must, or the vessels in which production took place.<sup>68</sup> The ordinance requires that treaders “under obligation of their oath, wash the vat [for wine-pressing] and the tank with water before their treading.” It goes on to state that “a Jewish man shall stand in the vat to receive the grapes into his hand, and [then] place them in the vat.” From

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<sup>66</sup>TK, 22.

<sup>67</sup>For this last insight I am indebted to Prof. Nicholas de Lange and the work of his student Martin Borysek, “*Takkanot Kandiyah: A Collection of Legislative Statutes as a Source for the Assessment of Laymen’s Legal Authority in a Jewish Community in Venetian Crete*” (PhD diss., Cambridge University, 2015, 150–52, esp. 150).

<sup>68</sup>On Cretan winepresses in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, see Charalambos Gasparis, “*Ta patitiria sti mesaioniche Kriti*,” *Oinon istoro* 4 (2005): 169–81.

these declarations, it is clear that Gentiles could have been involved in many facets of wine production, from the menial tasks of washing and preparing the vat, through conveying the grapes to the tank, to placing them there. This Cretan source permits the use of honey in wine-making for a particular ritual purpose: “the Jew shall be bound to first place honey in the pipe [leading into] the vat, in accordance with the holy custom, for in that case whatever drips from the juice of the grapes into the tank will be ritually permitted wine.” Medieval scholars, following Maimonides’s example, ruled that wine mixed with honey invalidates it for use on the altar. Once honey is added, the mixture takes on the status of “boiled wine” or “strong drink” free from the prohibition of *yein nesekh*.<sup>69</sup> From this text it is clear that Jews had to control virtually every task associated with the early phases of wine production, in all of which non-Jews could—and apparently sometimes did—play an active role.

If any of these procedures was not honored, the wine would lose its status as ritually permissible. Cretan authorities decreed that it had to be disposed of or sold to Gentiles:

And if it should come to pass that grapes are placed into the vat by a Gentile, without a Jew being present, and without honey being placed there, anything that drips into the tank from the grapes will be forbidden to the Jew who bought the wine, and he will not be able to receive it [the wine] under the status of ritually permitted wine; rather it has the status of wine rendered forbidden [by the manipulation of a Gentile suspected of dedicating it to idolatrous purposes]. Therefore, he shall pour it onto the earth as water (cf. Deuteronomy 12:16) or sell it to a Gentile, and afterwards wash the tank and the vat with water and dry it thoroughly.<sup>70</sup>

Jewish involvement in Cretan wine making was multifaceted. Jews were expected not only to perform the physically demanding task of treading but were also involved in washing and preparing vessels; carrying and depositing grapes; and smearing pipes leading into vats with a nutriment that acted as a prophylactic against the ritual invalidation of wine.

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<sup>69</sup>Maimonides, *Hilhot ma’achalot asurot*, 11:10. In southern Italy, it was an accepted practice to add honey to wine. See Reuben Bonfil, “Draft of a Document Establishing an Academy in the South of Italy at the End of the Fifteenth Century” [in Hebrew], *Sefer Zikaron leharav Yitzhaq Nisim* (Jerusalem, 1985), 185–204. Franco-German Jewry also accepted Maimonides’s formulation, but it was bitterly opposed in Provence and Catalonia. See Pinchas Roth, “Halakhah and Criticism in Southern France: Rabbi David ben Saul on the Laws of Wine Made by Gentiles,” *Tarbiz* 83 (2015): 439–63. I am grateful to Dr. Roth for sharing his work with me. See also Malkiel, “Gentile Wine,” 363–64.

<sup>70</sup>*TK*, 22–23.

This episode from the Cretan countryside in the 1360s is significant in a number of ways. It informs us that Jews lived in the country—even if only temporarily—to assist in wine production. It shows us that relations between Jews and Christians (contentious, in this case) necessitated Jews having to become more involved in agricultural life in order to ensure the supply of a foodstuff vital for ritual as well as sustenance. The need for ritually permitted products led to deeper Jewish involvement in agriculture.

David Jacoby has posited a model of medieval Jewish economic life that illuminates Cretan wine production.<sup>71</sup> He argues that Jewish economic networks were both internal and external. Internal networks consisted of the merchants, farmers, and supervisory rabbis dedicated to serving the needs of Jewish communities. Concurrently, medieval Jewish communities, such as that of Crete, developed what Jacoby called “external” networks, consisting of relationships with Jews in distant places, or with Gentile trading partners. Cretan wine was sold (and even banned due to suspicions of ritual laxity of its production) in places as distant as Cairo and Constantinople. It is likely that the authors of this ordinance bore in mind the need to produce an adequate supply of wine for Cretan use, as well as the requirements necessary for success on an international market. The need to produce ritually permissible food broadened and strengthened Jewish economic networks. It also meant that more Jews were involved in agriculture.

The fact that Jews were directly involved in agricultural activities such as wine production reveals that Halakhah (Jewish law) motivated Jews to farm as much as it drove them away from farming. Prominent historians of the Jews have argued the opposite. Luminaries such as Salo Baron have stressed that Halakhah in the Middle Ages made it harder to farm as a Jew.<sup>72</sup> The example of Cretan wine making demonstrates the opposite.

Halakhah did more than drive Jews onto the land; it demanded they understand and correctly identify its products. Another lay ordinance from 1363, the same year that sparked the controversy about Jews’ role in wine production as well as legislation to correct it, illuminates the importance of agricultural expertise, particularly the correct deployment of botanical nomenclature.<sup>73</sup> Throughout the diaspora, Jews took heed of a prohibition, known as *sha’atnez*, not to combine wool and linen within the same garments.<sup>74</sup> The biblical word for wool (*tzemer*) is unambiguous and does not present problems of translation or identification. The second fiber (*pishtim*) is more problematic. Often translated as “linen,” it can also mean flax.

<sup>71</sup>Jacoby, “The Jews in the Byzantine Economy,” esp. 221ff.

<sup>72</sup>Baron, *Social and Religious History of the Jews*, 4:157.

<sup>73</sup>TK #41, 33.

<sup>74</sup>Lev. 19:19.

In the entire medieval Jewish world (as well as in modern times among devout Jews) the combination of wool and linen/flax was illicit. Problems arose, however, in regions that grew hemp. Even though wool and flax were easily distinguished, hemp and flax were not. In most zones, hemp was understood to be a different species than linen/flax.<sup>75</sup> But in Crete, the opposite was the case: hemp was conflated with linen/flax and therefore forbidden to be used as thread to sew a woollen garment. The following table depicts this:

|              |                 |                                |
|--------------|-----------------|--------------------------------|
| Wool (צמר) + | Flax (פשתים) =  | A forbidden mixture everywhere |
| Wool (צמר) + | Hemp (קנבורס) = | A permitted mixture            |
| Wool (צמר) + | Hemp (קנבורס) = | A forbidden mixture on Crete   |

This difficulty was not unique to Crete. As one scholar of medieval textiles observed: “the cultivation, manufacture, and uses of canvas (cannabis = hemp) so closely resembled those of flax [that] these two textiles may be considered virtually interchangeable.”<sup>76</sup> It is also important to note that flax was, in the words of two environmental historians of the Middle Ages, “the most vital vegetable fiber in Europe until about 1300,” as well as “the source of the region’s linen cloth.”<sup>77</sup> The manufacture of silk textiles and garments was, along with tanning and dyeing, among the most popular professions practiced by the Jews throughout Byzantium.<sup>78</sup> One expert on Byzantine Jewry went so far as to say that the textile industry “was the mainstay of economic life for the Jewish community.”<sup>79</sup> On Crete, Jewish law applied to topics with economic implications. For a community whose religious stringency was called into question by Jews in Cairo, Constantinople, and elsewhere (bans on Cretan wines and cheeses were periodically threatened on

<sup>75</sup>In Linnaean classification, the difference goes beyond species to the genus of the plants. Hemp is *cannabis sativa*; flax is *linum usitatissimum*.

<sup>76</sup>Michael Hodder, “Flax,” in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, 13 vols., ed. Joseph Strayer (New York, 1982–1989), 5:83–84. A responsum from the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century by Asher ben Jehiel (d. 1327) notes that the Jews of Narbonne were stringent about sha’atnez and scrupulous in their avoidance of flax. He emphasizes that “every non-Jew knows” that Jewish tailors journey “to the country towns to buy thread made of hemp to sew with it, for it is not found [as easily] as flax is.” *She’elot u-teshuvot* 2:7.

<sup>77</sup>Ronald Edward Zupko and Robert Anthony Lares, *Straws in the Wind: Medieval Urban Environmental Law: The Case of Northern Italy* (Boulder, CO, 1996), 87. The importance of flax was by no means restricted to Europe. Jessica Goldberg has shown its centrality to the commercial interests of Genizah merchants in the eleventh-century Islamic world; see Jessica Goldberg, *Trade and Institutions in the Medieval Mediterranean: The Geniza Merchants and Their Business World* (Cambridge, 2012).

<sup>78</sup>Jacoby, “The Jews in the Byzantine Economy,” 229.

<sup>79</sup>Steven Bowman, *The Jews of Byzantium (1204–1453)* (Tuscaloosa, AL, 1985), 119.

the grounds that their production was not conducted or overseen with the requisite attention to legal detail),<sup>80</sup> Cretan Jewish punctiliousness in matters botanical counters contemporary perceptions of presumed laxity.

The authors of the 1363 ordinance declare that “a garment of wool and linen together may not come upon them.” The text goes on to implore “for the love of the most high God, they may not buy threads presumed to be hemp, but which in fact are flax.” The lay leadership of Crete rules here that the plant known as hemp (*canvus*) is identical to flax, and thereby constitutes a forbidden mixture when joined with wool. Lest the Jewish community take this matter lightly, the language of the text is forceful: “Their hands should not be stretched forth to provide a place for Satan in this matter.” Furthermore, sterner punishment than any mortal could allot lies ahead: “The man, who will act presumptuously, will be sentenced to hell.”<sup>81</sup> Proper observance of this arcane law was serious business on Crete.

In the Middle Ages, Greek-speaking Jewry acquired a reputation for legal rigor with regard to the observance of the sha’atnez prohibition. More specifically, the tendency of Jews throughout the Hellenic world, including Crete, to equate hemp with flax was noted by jurists and compilers in other settings. For example, the thirteenth-century Roman writer Tzidkiyahu ben Avraham Anav, better known as Tzidkiyahu ha-Rofe, criticized the tendency of Greek Jews to be “over-scrupulous” in this matter. In *Shibbole ha-Leqet* [Ears of Gleaning], his popular collection of legal teachings, he cited Rabbi Moses Cohen “in the land of Greece.”<sup>82</sup> According to Tzidkiyahu’s summary, Cohen had heard that some people in Greece had forbidden the use of hemp with wool, thinking that hemp is the same as flax.<sup>83</sup> Tzidkiyahu refutes this view, insisting that it is a widely accepted practice throughout the Jewish world to wear woolen garments sewn with hemp. “Let us return to our subject,” the Roman scholar writes, “to the over-scrupulous ones who hesitate on this matter, those who slander the earlier authorities who treated this matter in a lenient fashion since the days of their forefathers in all the lands of the diaspora: Germany, France, England, and Provence, for all of them wear wool sewn with hemp. No one had second thoughts in the matter.”<sup>84</sup> This geographical grouping suggests an agricultural axis in medieval

<sup>80</sup>Starr, “Jewish Life in Crete under the Rule of Venice,” 107, n. 142.

<sup>81</sup>*TK* #41, 33.

<sup>82</sup>No one has positively identified Rabbi Cohen.

<sup>83</sup>It is worthy of note that Moses of Greece himself is quoted as being opposed to the assumption that flax is identical to hemp, and that Rabbi Ephraim of Regensburg took a more stringent position and did equate the two. See *Tosafot* to BT *Zevahim* 18b, s.v. ve-Ema, and BT *Yoma* 12b. Rabbi Ephraim claimed that the *kanvus* in the Mishna is a different species. I am grateful to Pinchas Roth for this reference.

<sup>84</sup>Menahem Hasida, ed., *Rabbi Tzidkiyahu ha-Rofe (Tzidkiyahu ben Avraham Anav), Shibbole ha-Leqet* (Jerusalem, 1968), 77.

Jewish life. Italy, Byzantium, and Spain are all conspicuously missing from this list, indicating that northern Europeans lived in a place with divergent agricultural practices or simply had different botanical traditions, according to which hemp and flax were sharply differentiated.

Debates about botanical nomenclature were not mere legalistic squabbles; they resulted in social changes. In order to take a sartorial stricture seriously, Cretan Jews were enjoined to shift their business practices, and to alter their domestic arrangements. “Therefore, we decree,” the ordinance goes on, “that all Jews seek out a Jewish tailor to sew their garments.” Still, provision was made for alternative arrangements, arrangements that would have marked consequences for future generations:

If a Jewish tailor cannot be found, and if he requires a Christian tailor to sew for him a woollen garment, the Jew should bring the Christian tailor to his house and [the Christian tailor] should sew for him in the domain of the Jew, so that he may see with his own eyes that [the Christian tailor] not reinforce a flax garment with woollen ones, or [use] threads of flax to sew [a garment of] wool.<sup>85</sup>

The need to ensure proper observance of the biblical prohibition concerning sha’atnez led to the lodging of Christian tailors in Jewish homes. Apparently, the authors of this ordinance foresaw that there would be a deficit of qualified Jewish tailors; or, perhaps as likely, that Jews would seek the services of an expert seamster, regardless of his religion. Because the restriction concerning sha’atnez was rooted in a biblical prohibition its observance was taken very seriously. “The sages recalled,” the ordinance’s authors remind us, “that one who sees a forbidden mixture in his garment should remove it, even in the public marketplace.”<sup>86</sup> In other words, a Jew was expected to suffer the ill effects of public embarrassment so as not to transgress a biblical commandment. To avoid this, the Cretan lay leadership “decreed that Gentile artisans shall sew garments for Jews in Jewish homes.”<sup>87</sup>

On Crete in the Middle Ages, it was not unusual for people of one religion to hire workers or apprentices, and even lodge them in their own homes.<sup>88</sup> In fact the practice became highly common amongst Cretan Jews. What is unusual is that, in the space of only a few generations, the Jewish leadership

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<sup>85</sup>TK #41, 33.

<sup>86</sup>BT *Yoma* 69a; BT *Betzah* 14b.

<sup>87</sup>TK #41, 33.

<sup>88</sup>Elisabeth Santschi, “Contrats de travail et d’apprentissage en Crète vénitienne au XIVe siècle d’après quelques notaires,” *Revue d’histoire suisse* 19 (1969): 34–74; Sally McKee, “Households in Fourteenth-Century Venetian Crete,” *Speculum* 70 (January 1995): 27–67.

of Crete abruptly reversed its ruling. In 1363 they encouraged—or at least allowed—Jews to host and board Gentile tailors in their homes; by the early years of the sixteenth century, that situation was viewed as intolerable and a threat to the fabric of the community.

In 1518, Elia Capsali, who, as we have seen, collected the *Takkanot Kandiyah* that were eventually published in 1943, proposed a legal reform concerning the widespread practice of Jews hosting Gentiles. Capsali sets the scene in dramatic fashion:

...and it was that day, the second of Heshvan in the year 1518, the week of the pericope Noah (Genesis 6:9 to 11:32) I, a mere boy, alone among all the people in the house of my father's family... was required to explicate and investigate the affairs of our community, may its Rock protect it and may it thrive!<sup>89</sup>

In 1518, Capsali was either thirty-four or thirty-five years old, and certainly not a “boy” [*tza'ir*] any longer. The invocation of youth is meant to stress his humility, especially in the context of his illustrious family. “Young and old were there,” Capsali informs us, “wishing to know what Israel should do. I looked into doors, into the doors of some of the Jewish artisans who are found among us, such as tailors and cobblers.” What the rabbi and historian saw was an affront to his sensibilities. Peering into the homes and shops of his community's tailors and cobblers Capsali noted that

they had taken Gentiles for themselves, whomever they chose, and settled them securely in their homes, in their courtyards and castles.<sup>90</sup> They are not afraid of what our sages of blessed memory said—do not give up the idea of divine retribution [when you see sinners prosper].<sup>91</sup> They also do not hearken their hearts to the law of our authority, the exalted government of Venice, who decreed in their wisdom that Gentiles shall not regularly be found serving [Jews] in Jewish homes, for many reasons, and under penalty of a monetary fine: he shall pay as the judges determine.<sup>92</sup>

Cretan Jews, living as they did in a Venetian colony, were subject to the authority of Venice's Jewish leadership. Capsali's remarks indicate that Venetian rabbis noted and forbade the widespread practice of Gentiles serving in

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<sup>89</sup>TK #74, 78–80, esp. 79.

<sup>90</sup>Cf. Num. 31:10.

<sup>91</sup>*Pirke Avot* 1:7.

<sup>92</sup>TK #74, 78–80, esp. 79.

Jewish homes.<sup>93</sup> The Jews of Crete failed to heed Venice's authority. The punishment Capsali proposed was a fine—the legally sanctioned punitive measure for this category of offense.

Capsali's focus here is on his community's disobedience of Venetian authority. Later, his tone shifts, and his language becomes more caustic and condemnatory: he slides into moral opprobrium. "From this day forward," the Cretan rabbi harangued his congregants, "no one from among our people, man or woman, foreigner or resident, near or far, whoever he may be, from the artisans mentioned above, shall increase his sin and add evil to his evil." Nor shall Jews "be permitted ever again to take Gentile attendants to remain all day long within the community to serve him." Hiring and harboring Gentile "attendants" was not only an affront to Venetian decrees; it was morally unacceptable to invite non-Jews "within the community."<sup>94</sup>

These ordinances demonstrate the significance of agricultural practices and of botanical knowledge. In the 1360s, Cretan Jewish authorities scolded their community about laxity in the observance of the biblical commandment which prohibits sewing wool and linen together. To ensure proper respect for this law, they allowed Jews to engage Gentile tailors with one proviso: that Jews lodge them in their homes in order to supervise them more attentively. So far as we know Cretan Jews did exactly that: by the 1510s, their practice of hosting Gentile tailors and cobblers was so common that it earned condemnation from Venetian jurists. A seemingly insignificant thing (confusing one plant and its thread for another) led to social intercourse, and then to the violation of a prohibition. Knowledge of plants mattered to medieval Jews.

Medieval Jewish intellectual life was stimulated by a variety of problems. Some of those problems—such as how to identify hemp, or how to regulate the production of must—have little to do with the traditional concerns of pre-modern Jewish thinkers and their modern interpreters, such as marriage and divorce, liturgical practices, and ritual observances. A broad look at an evidentiary base that includes responsa, communal ordinances, and legal compilations forces us to concede that agricultural concerns stood alongside more conventional preoccupations in the minds of learned medieval Jews.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup>For contemporary sources from Venice and the Veneto, several of which express misgivings about Venetian Jewry's moral uprightness, see Robert Bonfil, "Aspects of the Social and Spiritual Life of the Jews in the Venetian Territories at the Beginning of the Sixteenth Century" [in Hebrew], *Zion* 41 (1976): 68–96.

<sup>94</sup>*TK* #74, 78–80, esp. 79. Other communal ordinances (*takkanot*) from the Italophone world of this period express similar reservations about Jews congregating with non-Jews. See Louis Finkelstein, *Jewish Self-Government in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1924), 290–94.

<sup>95</sup>Evidence for this extends far beyond the shores of Crete. In the Crown of Aragon, for example Rashba, Solomon Ibn Adret (*She'elot u-teshuvot* 1:744), was asked about *hadash* (new produce not permitted before *omer* day) and *'orlah* (fruit of trees during their first three

Those agricultural concerns were kindled by a broad range of Jewish economic activity. That range was especially wide in Byzantium and in Venice's Hellenic territories. Jews were more tied to the land than scholarship typically admits. During the fifteenth century, in the Aragonese city of Huesca, for example, Jews were known to be "for the most part cultivators of fields and vineyards."<sup>96</sup> Jewish engagement with agriculture could shift social practices and shape legal principles. The case of Jewish grape-treaders exemplifies how economic actions shaped social life and prompted legal reforms. Cretan Jewish punctiliousness about sha'atnez also led to social and domestic reconfigurations: the requirement to ban the use of hemp meant more Gentile tailors in Jewish homes, and eventually led to a ban on that practice in Venetian territories.

This article has focused on a Jewish diaspora (Byzantium, and particularly Venetian Crete) that is often neglected in narratives of medieval Jewish history.<sup>97</sup> Those narratives often feature Jews as cultural beacons, as they were in Golden Age Spain for *belles lettres*; in medieval Ashkenaz for their rabbinic learning and piety; and in Renaissance Italy for their appropriation of non-Jewish culture. Historiography also casts Jews as economic catalysts: in Fatimid Egypt Jews are labeled prominent in trade; in medieval German-speaking lands, and later in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth for their control of industry. The geographical background to this article is peripheral to the best-known and most closely studied medieval Jewish cultures. Shifting Byzantium and formerly Byzantine territories from the periphery towards the center encourages us to modify entrenched narratives of Jewish life in the Middle Ages.

One of the most important of those myths maintains that Jews gradually left the land during the Middle Ages. However, we possess incontrovertible proof that Jews lived in the countryside and farmed it. Why should this matter? For one thing it indicates that medieval Jewish life and culture were more diverse than our impressions of Jews as moneylenders, rabbis, and doctors would have us believe. For another, Jews who flourished in rural settings signal to the historian demographic stability. Those in the professions may

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years). He also answered a query about whether a vine that had been grafted fell under the 'orlah restriction (*She'elot u-teshuvot* 4:292). These are two of many examples. For a recent study that uses foodways to analyze cultural otherness in the Middle Ages, see David M. Freidenreich, *Foreigners and Their Food: Constructing Otherness in Jewish, Christian and Islamic Law* (Berkeley, 2011).

<sup>96</sup>Juan Piqueras Haba, "Los judíos y el vino en España: siglos XI–XV, una geografía histórica," *Cuadernos de Geografía* 75 (2004): 17–41, esp. 20: "pro magna parte laboratores sive cultivatores agrorum et vinearum."

<sup>97</sup>Nicholas de Lange, "Qui a tué les Juifs de Byzance?" in *Politique et religion dans le judaïsme ancien et médiéval*, ed. Daniel Tollet (Paris, 1989), 327–33.

ply their trade anywhere; farmers are more rooted. As Attilio Milano observed of southern Italy during the Middle Ages: “The diffusion of Jews in the countryside is indicative of a long-tranquil environment.”<sup>98</sup> Still, a landed Jewry engaged in agriculture in the Middle Ages is even more significant. For historians of the Jews and historians of medieval Europe alike, urbanization depended on Jews as agents. Simply put, they lent the money that made commercial expansion possible. A refined version of that model may explain the rise of the modern nation-state in the early modern period, but it is less effective for medieval Europe.

In the European Middle Ages, Jews did not universally act as proto-capitalists. Their religion prevented them from doing so. Halakhah acted as a brake on Jewish participation in, let alone catalysis of the Commercial Revolution. According to historians such as Robert Lopez and Peter Spufford, the High Middle Ages were marked by a shift from subsistence farming to raising cash crops.<sup>99</sup> Since observance of Halakhah is often commercially disadvantageous in rural settings, Jews could not instigate the Commercial Revolution. One example, while removed from the geography of this study, drives home the point. Jonah ben Abraham of Gerona, who died in 1264, extended a prohibition on viticulture from the Sabbath and festival days to the ten days between the Jewish New Year and Day of Atonement.<sup>100</sup> This meant that Jewish viticulturists could not tend their vines for eight days. Coming as it does in autumn, such a restriction was onerous. Judaism may have done as much to retard the transition from subsistence to commercial agriculture as it did to accelerate it. In the declensionist narratives of environmental history, religion is often the villain, either explicitly or implicitly.<sup>101</sup> Evidence from medieval Jewish texts indicates that religion can slow rather than hasten environmental degradation.

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<sup>98</sup>Attilio Milano, *Storia degli ebrei in Italia* (Turin, 1963), 107.

<sup>99</sup>Peter Spufford, *Money and Its Use in Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, 1988); Robert Lopez, *The Commercial Revolution of the Middle Ages 950–1350* (Prentice Hall, 1971).

<sup>100</sup>*Sha'are Teshuvah* (Warsaw, 1827), 15r-v. Rabbi Jonah was also stringent about banning the use of grapes from a vine before the vine had been redeemed in its fourth year, and strict in his view that *'orlah* applied outside the Land of Israel. See *Sha'are Teshuvah* (Lemberg, 1847), 21v.

<sup>101</sup>For the explicit version of this argument, see Lynn White Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” *Science* (March 10, 1967), 1203–7. For a rejoinder, see Jeremy Cohen, *Be Fertile and Increase, Fill the Earth and Master It: The Ancient and Medieval Career of a Biblical Text* (Ithaca, 1989). For a subtler take, see Brett Walker, *Toxic Archipelago: A History of Industrial Disease in Japan* (Seattle, 2010), esp. ch. 2, in which Buddhist funereal practices are blamed for environmental and epidemiological problems.

## Conclusion

We have seen how Jews deployed knowledge of local geography and agriculture to honor their faith, as for example in the discussion concerning flax and hemp. Their unique ways of relating to the land set them apart from those among whom they lived. Scholars such as Blumenkranz, Motis Dolader, and Toch nevertheless insist that Jews farmed just like everyone else.<sup>102</sup> These historians write apologetically and seem eager to show that Jews are—and always have been—just like everybody else. In the decades immediately after World War II and its attendant horrors for European Jewry, this is certainly understandable. With the greater distance and heightened dispassion that Clio inspires we might embrace the distinctiveness of Jewish approaches to the natural world.<sup>103</sup> A consideration of topics such as *'orlah* (fruit of trees in their first three years), *kilayyim* (the forbidden mixing of heterogeneous plants in the same field), *hadash* (new produce of the field), and *neta reva'i* (a vineyard in its fourth year) indicates that this is not entirely true. Jews certainly worshipped differently than Christians—and, at least prescriptively, they may have farmed differently, too.<sup>104</sup>

Nearly a century ago Marc Bloch, the great French medievalist, noted that “diverse agrarian patterns could have been the product of differing religious concepts.” He qualified his remark, equivocating: “Here we are entering on very uncertain ground, which crumbles away as soon as we try to examine the issue instead of merely stating it as a hypothesis.”<sup>105</sup> To my knowledge, Bloch never wrote another line on the topic. He may have given up too easily. To determine whether the “ground crumbles away” we have to get our hands dirty. Fortunately, sources of medieval Jewish history in Byzantium and the

<sup>102</sup>Toch, *Economic History of European Jews*, 215, in which he makes this point regarding Blumenkranz. See Miguel Ángel Motis Dolader, “Explotaciones agrarias de los Judíos de Tarazona (Zaragoza) a fines del siglo XV,” *Sefarad* 45 (1985): 353–90. See also Juan Piqueras Haba, “Los judíos y el vino en España: siglos XI–XV, una geografía histórica” *Cuadernos de Geografía* 75 (2004): 17–41: 26, in which he claims that the Jews “practicaban la viticultura de la misma manera que lo hacían los cristianos y los mudéjars.”

<sup>103</sup>Derek Penslar has observed that, in the wake of the Holocaust, talk of Jewish economic distinctiveness lost respectability, as even its benign forms were associated with Nazi anti-Semitism. See his “Foreword” to Gideon Reuveni and Sarah Wobick-Segev, eds., *The Economy in Jewish History: New Perspectives on the Interrelationship between Ethnicity and Economic Life* (New York, 2010), vii–x, esp. vii.

<sup>104</sup>John Mandsager argues for the particularity of rabbinic agricultural practices and the inscription of agricultural spaces as distinctively Jewish during the Tannaitic period. See John Mandsager, “To Stake a Claim: The Making of Rabbinic Agricultural Spaces in the Roman Countryside” (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2014, esp. 261–63).

<sup>105</sup>Marc Bloch, *French Rural History: An Essay on Its Basic Characteristics* (Berkeley, 1966 [French original 1931]), 63, n. 58.

former Byzantine lands—along with texts from other Mediterranean settings, such as Spain and Italy—allow us to do just that.

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