

3C ITALY AND SICILY

The history of Jewish communities in Italy and nearby Sicily is unparalleled and difficult to figure out, much more difficult than that of the Jews communities in southern France or the Iberian peninsula. While the communities in both southern France and the Iberian Peninsula showed significant diversity, they shared enough characteristics to present their history in a straightforward way. In the case of the Italian peninsula, there are no such commonalities among its diverse regions which did not achieve anything close to political unity during the Middle Ages. Parts of Italy had the oldest medieval Jewish communities, while other areas had no Jews in the year 1000 and only gained a Jewish population during the later medieval centuries. In other words, in certain areas of Italy, Jewish communities very much resembled those of southern Europe, with long-established and economically diversified communities, while in other areas, like the north, they more closely resembled northern Europe, with new Jewish populations settling into specific economic roles.

In addition to the regional differences, medieval Italy was politically and militarily weak which invited outside interference, invasions, and conquests. As a result, the history of the Jews of Italy is often influenced by policies from other areas in Europe. As a result, the story of medieval Italian Jewry is completely fragmented. We must therefore divide the history in three separate areas: the first being Sicily and Southern Italy, the second the Jewish communities of the papal states and Rome; and the third the later developed Jewish communities in the north.

We again turn to Benjamin of Tudela's twelfth-century writings. During his travels to the east, he reported on size of the Jewish population in the following Italian cities: Genoa two Jews, Pisa twenty, Lucca forty, Rome two hundred, Capua three hundred, Naples five hundred, Salerno six hundred, Amalfi twenty, Benevento two hundred, Melfi two hundred, Trani two hundred, Taranto three hundred, Brindisi ten, and Otranto five hundred Jews. On his way back, he visited Sicily, where he reported two hundred Jews in Messina, and fifteen hundred in Palermo.

Several conclusions can be drawn from this somewhat odd list. Firstly, the center of the Jewish population on the Italian Peninsula in the 12th century was predominantly in the south. The Jewish population in northern cities, such as Genoa, Pisa, and Lucca, were tiny compared to the larger

populations in the south, particularly in Naples, Salerno, Otranto, and especially Palermo. Secondly, the Jewish populations in southern Italy, ranging from five hundred to fifteen hundred, significantly surpassed those in the towns Benjamin had visited in the northern portions of the Iberian peninsula, in southern France, and in northern Italy. Finally, the fragmentation of the Italian Peninsula was evident as well. Benjamin repeatedly observed the small territories he encountered, each with its own laws, as well as the considerable variation in Jewish populations in southern Italy, ranging from many hundreds to as low as ten or twenty, indicating significant differences between one location and another.

In the first half of our period, most Jewish people lived in the south, with probably over half of Italy's Jews in Sicily. Sicily was ruled by Muslims into the eleventh century, and parts of southern Italy were under Byzantine rule. Under Muslim rule (like on the Iberian peninsula), Jews benefited from a multi-religious and multi-cultural setting. The *Megillat Aḥima'az*, authored by Aḥima'az ben Palṭiel, offers valuable insights into the Byzantine territories of the peninsula in this early period. Despite some fanciful elements, this narrative provides information on the fluctuations of Jewish life in southern Italy, which was divided into Muslim, Byzantine, and Latin Christian regions.

Jewish economic life in the south had a very long history and shows a high level of diversification. Jews were involved crafts, business, medicine, and to some extent in agriculture. The strength of the Jewish communities in Sicily and southern Italy was partially due to this diversification. Jewish participation in medicine was particularly noteworthy. Just like in Muslim Spain, this involved both the traditional practice and expertise on the one hand and knowledge of the literature of science on the other. Jewish connections across the Mediterranean world, resulting in knowledge of a variety of languages, contributed to Jewish mastery of the inherited scientific literature.

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Even if these memories cannot be verified, there is considerable evidence suggesting that these memories and beliefs bear some truth. Looking at gravestone inscriptions, there was an increased use of Hebrew across southern Italy during the early Middle Ages. More important is the preservation of Hebrew poetry from tenth century in the later *Megillat Ahima'az* which demonstrates mastery of the Hebrew language and a high level of poetic refinement. Even more striking is *Sefer Yosippon*. Presented as a Hebrew translation of the writings of Flavius Josephus and written in beautiful Hebrew, *Sefer Yosippon* became an important source of Jewish knowledge of late antiquity.

Even before the year 1000, a major creative figure appeared in southern Italy. His name was Shabbetai Donnolo and he was a physician, a scientific writer, a linguist, a talmudist, and a mystic. Born in Oria, Donnolo was a practicing physician-pharmacist with deep knowledge of Greek and Latin writings. Written in Italy in the Hebrew language, his *Book of Remedies* was innovative for both Italy and for Hebrew. Donnolo's commentary on the mystical work *Sefer Yeẓirah* is a very early indication of Jewish attraction to mystical thought within the western Christian world.

Muslim and Byzantine dominion over Sicily and southern Italy succumbed to the expansion of western Christendom, particularly from the north. During the eleventh century, roughly at the same time as when the Christian reconquest of the Iberian peninsula began, it was the Normans who first took control of these areas, making them a permanent part of Christian Europe. In the twelfth century, the Normans were replaced by the Hohenstaufens who ruled through the mid-thirteenth century. After the Hohenstaufens came the Angevins, only to be again replaced by the Aragonese.

So far as we can tell, the Normans did not disrupt the earlier characteristics of Jewish life in the territories they conquered. Like the Christian conquerors in Iberia, they considered the Jews useful allies in maintaining a high level of civilization in their newly conquered areas. who considered the Jewish people as possible allies, had a major influence on the conquest of the Jewish community. The Jewish population of Sicily and northern Italy even increased during the twelfth century due to immigration from Iberia and North Africa as a result of persecution by the Almoravids and especially the Almohads. Jews who fled this persecution escaped to the northern parts of Iberia, into southern France, across the sea to Sicily and southern Italy, and sometimes even the lands further east of the Mediterranean. Those Jews who settled in Sicily and southern Italy under Norman rule seem to have received hospitably.

The Hohenstaufens too, had a limited impact on the Jewish communities of Sicily and southern Italy. Under Emperor Frederick II in particular, the Jews in these regions played an important role in transmitting knowledge from the Muslim and Byzantine worlds into the fast-developing intellectual circles of western Christendom. As mentioned before, the Muslim world had preserved much of the intellectual legacy of antiquity through the translation of scientific, philosophic, and literary masterpieces into Arabic. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when western Christendom quickly became more powerful in the West, there was an even greater need to translate the intellectual legacy preserved by the Muslim world into Latin. The Jews of Sicily and southern Italy played a significant role in this process. As a result of their contacts throughout the Mediterranean world, many Jews were proficient in multiple languages, including Hebrew, Arabic, Greek, Latin, and early Italian. To some extent, these Jews worked independently, aiming to make Arabic classics available in Hebrew. At the same time, some of them collaborated with Christians, often with support from the government, creating a Latin corpus. Emperor Frederick II's court was especially renowned for its commitment to facilitating the translation of classical texts, with Jews prominently involved in this process.

During the thirteenth century, the southern Italian Jewish tendency for wide-ranging cultural creativity continued. Jewish schools were thriving and Jews composed works in a wide variety of literary genres. Like in other Jewish communities in medieval western Christendom, rabbinic studies were central to their education, and creativity in this area was highly valued. Likewise, Italian Jews devoted themselves to studying the Hebrew Bible in several ways, ranging from closely examining the literal meaning of the biblical text to exploring its philosophical and mystical implications.

The earlier mentioned attraction of southern-Italian Jews to medicine and science, was a lasting interest. During the thirteenth century, Jewish physicians were quite common, and many became prominent in non-Jewish circles as well. The interest in medicine and science easily led to a propensity for philosophy. Jewish thinkers in southern Italy were very much part of the thirteenth-century trend across western Christendom to delve into philosophy, often from the perspective of the great twelfth-century philosopher Moses Maimonides. Commentaries on the works of Maimonides were written by several Jewish intellectuals. However, the opposition against philosophy in general and against the teachings of Maimonides in particular, which began in the early thirteenth century in southern France, eventually reached southern Italy as well during that same century.

An interesting figure, who illustrates much of what we discussed before, is the thirteenth-century Hillel ben Samuel. Like so many Jews of this time, Hillel moved from place to place, visiting places such as Rome, Capua, and Naples. Born into a distinguished rabbinic family of Verona, Hillel was a physician, a scientific writer, and a talmudist. Yet, he is best known as a philosopher, his major work being *Tagmulei ha-Nefesh (The Rewards of the Soul)*, a composition of reflections on key elements and works of prior philosophic speculations. Hillel's philosophic writings indicate familiarity with some of the scholastic thinking that was in vogue in Christian circles during this period. Hillel became heavily involved in the controversy over the writings of Maimonides that resurfaced at the end of the thirteenth century. He was a passionate defender of Maimonides and of philosophical inquiry in general, attempting - with considerable success - to rally the supporters of philosophy against its opponents.

The mystical teachings that had begun to stir Jewish life in western Christendom during the twelfth century and developed more fully in the thirteenth century made their way to Italy. In part, this was a movement of people, in part a movement of books and ideas. Abraham Abulafia, an important figure in thirteenth-century Jewish mysticism, came to Italy and exchanged ideas with various Italian Jewish thinkers. Even without this direct personal interaction, Italian Jews started to read works written further west and added their own contributions to the sprouting oeuvre of mystical writings.

Under Aragonese rule, from the late thirteenth century on, Jewish life in Sicily and southern Italy for a long time remained largely unchanged. By the end of the fifteenth century, change was on the horizon. Rabid anti-Jewish preaching emerged resulting in anti-Jewish riots. The edict of expulsion of 1492 also included the Jews of the areas under Aragonese rule in Sicily and southern Italy, despite objections by local authorities. A long and esteemed history came to a sudden end.

Moving on to the second part of Italy in the middle of the Peninsula, this area was controlled by the papacy with its center in Rome. The Jewish community of Rome had of course deep roots, going back to antiquity. Among the early Jewish communities of Italy, that of Rome was the largest and most significant. Valuable information about Jewish communities in southern Europe during late antiquity come from inscriptions, and the location of these inscriptions is telling. From all the inscriptions that have been discovered, there are three inscriptions from southern France, eleven from Spain, nineteen from Sicily, one hundred twenty-one from southern-Italian site outside of Rome, and five hundred fifty from Rome itself. The central place that the southern parts of Italy and especially the city of Rome occupied in the lives of the Jews is apparent.

It is easy to comprehend the significance of Ancient Rome and its Jewish community. The great city was the commercial, political, and cultural core of late antiquity, the dominant urban enclave of a powerful empire. Naturally, Rome became a magnet for adventurous Jewish migrants who were attracted to its economic, social, and cultural opportunities. Situated at the heart of the empire, the Jews took on a vital role in Jewish political life during late antiquity. The Jews of Rome negotiated with the Roman authorities on behalf of their fellow Jews throughout the empire. The often-conflicted community of Palestine was in constant contact with the Jewish community of Rome, sending delegations to advocate for them before the imperial authorities, making use of the political, economic, and social influence of the Jews in the capital city.

Many traces of ancient Rome could still be seen and admired during the Middle Ages, and the Jews of medieval Rome were certainly aware of that earlier greatness. Benjamin of Tudela has left a striking description of his visit to Rome in which he mentions the city's ancient monuments. He mentioned that *"there are eighty palaces belonging to eighty kings that lived there"* starting with the ancient King Tarquinius, down to Nero and Tiberius - who lived during the time of Jesus - and ending with Pepin, the father of Charlemagne. Benjamin describes several of these buildings, including those that were allegedly inhabited by Julius Caesar, Titus, and Vespasian. It can be assumed that Benjamin of Tudela's guides in Rome were local Jews who must have been proud of their city's historic glory.

However, medieval Rome and Italy were very different from Rome and Italy of late antiquity. From the fifth century on, central power had gradually eroded in the western parts of the Roman Empire as did control over the peninsula. A weakened Italy became a target for many powerful groups both from outside western Christendom (the Byzantines and Muslims), and from the outside (the Normans, Germans, French, and Aragonese). In the Middle Ages, Italy was no longer the center that it had been in antiquity. The Italian peninsula had been transformed into an exposed area, situated on the border between western and eastern Christendom and between the worlds of Christianity and Islam. Even within western Christendom, Italy was a regular target of foreign ambitions.

There is one respect in which Rome retained its former glory and centrality in the West. Despite Rome no longer being the capital of a powerful empire, it remained the center of the world of Roman Catholicism. It was Rome where the Pope resided. It was from Rome that the Church sent its emissaries throughout the western Christian world and in return received delegations from far and wide. It is true that the seat of the Pope was often endangered due to the constant battles over the Italian peninsula.

On many occasions, the Pope was forced to flee Rome to another location in Italy or even outside its borders. Nonetheless, the perception of a papal with greatness and authority survived all these challenges. Here too, the Jewish community of Rome took on an important role because of its location in the center of (religious) religious authority.

The sense that Rome was important as the center of the Catholic Church is apparent in an early Hebrew source from northern Europe. Some of the story's details may be questionable, but the overall perception of the importance of Rome and of Rome's Jewish community is evident in this document. The Hebrew account tells of Jews in eleventh century northern Europe who were threatened by some local rulers in who ordered the Jews to choose between conversion and death. According to this recorded story, a major Jewish leader named Jacob ben Yekutiel challenged these barons by arguing that only the Pope in Rome had the authority to issue such an edict. Reportedly, ben Yekutiel was sent off to Rome, where he was well received by the city's Jews and successfully argued his case before the pope. Whether or not this story is historic, the Jews of northern Europe clearly perceived the papacy and the Jews of Rome as significantly influential.

Once again, our traveler, Benjamin of Tudela, provides us with valuable information. Benjamin begins his depiction of Rome by noting: *"Rome is the head of the kingdoms of Christendom and contains about two hundred Jews, who occupy an honorable position and pay no tribute. Among them are officials of Pope Alexander, the spiritual head of all Christendom."* Benjamin expressed his perception of the central role of the Pope across Christendom and portrayed a positive relationship between Rome's Jews and the papal court. The important *Constitutio pro Judeis* which served as a basic statement of Jewish rights from the twelfth century onwards, was regularly applied to the Jewish community of Rome. The Jews of Rome very played the same intercessory role with the papacy as their ancestors had served with the Roman emperors.

The medieval Jewish community in Rome was the most stable of all the Jewish settlements in medieval Italy. Despite frequent hardships, it also enjoyed lengthy periods of material ease and spiritual creativity. It was the only Jewry in Italy that uninterruptedly survived from the beginning to the end of our period as a significant community. While shifts in Jewish life occurred throughout Italy, Rome was an uninterrupted home for a considerable Jewish community from 1000 to 1500 and beyond. Its stability was partially grounded in the long and rich past of the Jews in Rome. Probably more important was the papacy and its longstanding moderate policy towards the Jews.

Besides playing a role as intercessor, the Jewish community of Rome developed its own rich own creativity. An especially remarkable example was Nathan Ben Yehiel of Rome. Living at the same time as the famous giants of eleventh-century Iberia, Nathan grew up in Rome, and studied at his father's Talmud academy where he eventually became the leader. Nathan wrote a dictionary of terms that appear in the Talmud and in Midrash with detailed explanations. The book became a classic of rabbinic literature. It was copied numerous times, often quoted, and repeatedly printed.

Jews in Rome remained active in traditional studies, i.e. the study of biblical and rabbinic texts, but at the same time, made contributions in newer areas, especially in the field of poetry. An intriguing example, Immanuel of Rome, was born and raised in Rome. Like many of his fellow Jews, Immanuel was a frequent traveler. He wrote a collection of *maḥbarót*, collections of poems inspired by the Arabic genre called *maqáma*, which combined rhymed prose with poetry. Immanuel was immersed in the Hebrew poetry of Iberia which was heavily influenced by Arabic poetic genres. At the same time, he was familiar with and impacted by the Italian poetry of his era, the age of Dante.

The content of Immanuel's *maḥbarót* varies widely, from lighthearted and silly to deeply serious. The most interesting *maḥbèret* is the last one in his collection entitled *Maḥbèret haTófet ve-ha`Éden* (The Maqáma of Hell and Heaven). Immanuel's literary journey through hell and heaven reflects full awareness of Dante's epic poem; critics have suggested direct borrowing for certain episodes. Immanuel's poetry is regarded as one of the best of medieval Jewish poetic creativity.

While not large, the Jewish community of Rome was distinguished due to its longevity, stability, role as a mediator with the head of the Roman Catholic Church, and its ongoing creativity. It stands out as a beacon of stability in the rapidly changing reality of the Jewish communities of medieval western Christendom.

During the thirteenth century, the demography of Italy Jewry began to change significantly. On the one hand, the old Jewish centers in the south were under new pressures, mostly from outside the Italian peninsula, while on the other hand new centers of Jewish life emerged in the central and northern parts of the peninsula. Before that, the number of Jews in these areas had been quite sparse. It is suggested that before the thirteenth century Jews were known to live in less than twenty towns throughout central and northern Italy. By the end of our period, the number of Jewish communities reached into the hundreds, even though most of them were admittedly quite small.

The growth of the Jewish communities in the north was caused by a combination of factors. The first to mention is a demographic development. By the second half of the thirteenth century, both on the Italian peninsula and elsewhere, Jews were on the move looking for hospitable places to settle. Some Jews from southern Italy were moving up north into areas that had not harbored Jewish before. Other Jews were leaving the settlements in the northern areas of Europe. We already know that the Jews of England were expelled in 1290 but the decline of the English Jewries was already evident by the middle decades of the thirteenth century. Similarly, the long reign of King Louis IX of France (1230-1270) brought a clear deterioration in the lives of the Jews of northern France long before the expulsion from France in 1306. In Germany too, increasing anti-Jewish violence led many German Jews to look for a better life elsewhere.

But there is more that plays a role than just the wish for change and the desire to find refuge. Economic opportunities are also necessary to attract and sustain new Jewish populations. This economic opportunity again came in the form of the same Jewish specialty that had emerged in northern Europe in the middle of the twelfth century. There, the need for capital and the Church's prohibition against Christians taking interest from other Christians had opened for the Jews a new economic specialization in moneylending. This Jewish moneylending came in many forms, from sophisticated, lucrative banking to ordinary loan on a small scale. By the end of the twelfth century and the beginning of the thirteenth century, this development began to take place in northern Italy as well. New Jewish settlements began to spring up that were largely sustained by the moneylending business. These new settlements were protected by formal agreements with the local authorities of these dominions.

The young Jewish communities in the north were not immune to the hardships of the fourteenth century, including economic decline and the Black Death. Nonetheless, Jewish suffering in northern Italy was not as devastating as in other places such as Germany. That doesn't mean that there was no pressure on Italy's Jews. There was. Traditional Church policies and portrayal of Jews makes the occurrence of problems almost inevitable. But there was another familiar factor, the issue of Jewish moneylending. Moneylending has never been a popular profession. The obligation to repay and the penalties for not paying on time often arouse anger against the lender. In addition, there is a perception that profit from moneylending is unfair and this is fed by traditional teachings from both philosophy and theology. In addition, when the practice of moneylending appeared in Italy, a whole corpus of objections against Jewish lending had already been formulated. While some ecclesiastical authorities still permitted Jewish taking of interest, other influential leaders within the Church rejected and bitterly opposed it.

Within the Church in northern Italy, a new movement emerged that was militantly opposed to Jewish lending. This movement was called the “*Observatine*” wing of the Franciscan Order. The Franciscan Order had been founded by St. Francis of Assisi and its followers had to take a vow of poverty. As time went on, it began to devote itself to preaching to poor city dwellers, and to convincing and opposing heretics and infidels (including the Jews). It often happens that a movement loses sight of its original ideals, and groups within the Franciscan community in Italy believed that the emphasis on poverty had declined within their order. These more stringent Franciscans were very concerned with the fate of poor Christians who owed money to Jews, as well as with the wealth that Jews accumulated at the expense of the Christian poor. The vilification of Jews by radical Franciscan preachers reached a hysterical level towards the end of the fourteenth century.

Concerns of the Church with the poor (especially of the Franciscans) led to a movement to create charitable loan institutions that would make the Jewish lenders obsolete. These institutions were called *Monti di Pietà* (Mountains of Mercy). The idea was simple: loan institutions that were aimed towards the best interest of the underprivileged were to be preferred to the destructive effects that Jewish lenders had on the poor. While the idea was simple, running such institutions was not. The movement encountered a range of problems in their efforts to support the poor and to put the Jewish moneylenders out of business. As a result, Jewish moneylenders were able to continue their trade.

When a new way of thinking emerged with the dawning of the Renaissance, especially in the north, this served as a counterbalance against the Church’s fierce incitement against the Jews. In many ways, the fifteenth century was a time of progress for the young Jewish communities of northern Italy. One very important development was the establishment of Jewish printing houses in several towns of northern Italy. Firstly, this new technology was about to radically change the cultural climate of western Christendom. Secondly, the printing of Jewish writings was to have great impact on Jewish cultural life.

Studies of the Jewish communities of northern Italy during our period have brought a special feature to light. As Michele Luzzati writes: “*the most astonishing behavior of the Jews of northern and central Italy is not (...) their mobility but their outright nomadism. (...) These Jews themselves descended from ‘immigrant’ families (from Rome, southern Italy, Germany, etc.), were not satisfied with moving only once from one town to another, but changed their residence several times during their lifetimes, so that they eventually became known as ‘habitores’ of four, five, or more cities or towns.*” This mobility was to become a significant characteristic of modern Jewish existence.

The story of the Jews of Italy is special in many ways. Perhaps most remarkable is their endurance. Of all the Jewish communities that we shall study, only the Italian Jews were able to continue from the beginning to the end of our period. In fact, the history of Italian Jewry began more than a millennium before our period and continued into the twenty-first century. With the disappearance of many old Jewish communities in the Muslim world, Italian Jewry is currently one of the oldest Jewish communities in existence. The Jewish communities of medieval Italy, in spite of their being fragmented, showed considerable resilience in meeting the challenges it frequently had to face. They also showed a willingness to change location and economic activity, which is impressive. The Jews of medieval Italy also contributed significantly to the cultural legacy of western Christendom. The importance of Italian Jewry has been somewhat overshadowed by the larger Iberian (Sephardic) community and the even larger mixture of northern European (Ashkenazic) Jewish communities. As a separate entity, medieval Italian Jewry has often been neglected. Given the richness of the Italian Jewish history, this is most unfortunate.