Selective Inclusion: Integration and Isolation of Jews in Medieval Italy

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Selective Inclusion: Integration and Isolation of Jews in Medieval Italy

Samuel D. Gruber

This essay presents episodes, mostly from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, that demonstrate how Jews existed within the spatial framework of Rome and elsewhere in medieval Christian Italy, straddling social, economic, and spatial boundaries. Using a variety of sources to physically locate Jews in Italian urban culture allows a better understanding of the civic space available to them in Italian cities in the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance. Stretching from just before the promulgation of anti-Jewish decrees at the Fourth Lateran Council until the creation of the Venetian ghetto in 1516, this was a tumultuous but transformative period of Italian and Jewish history, in which Jewish communities settled and thrived throughout the entire peninsula.

Boundaries between Jews and Christians

Léon Poliakov has written that, before the Counter-Reformation, ‘the social and judicial conditions of the Jews in Italy had not sunk anywhere near the level of degradation they reached elsewhere’, and that ‘the Jews’ everyday relationships with Christians were often imbued with a cordiality’ (Poliakov 1977). Many reasons have been put forward for the disparities between the fate of Italian Jewish communities and that of their co-religionists further north. These include the millennium-long presence of Jews in Italy, Italy’s fragmented political structure, and the greater tradition of urban life and of acceptance of trade and a money economy. The presence of the pope, too, made a difference: politically and financially, Roman popes often worked closely with Jewish financiers, and the medieval papacy regarded the protection of its Jews as a religious responsibility.

In Rome, the oldest and strongest of Italian communities, Jews maintained their identity as a people with deep roots in the ancient past on the one hand and actively involved in contemporary events on the other. They were an ancient presence, carved in stone on the ‘Arch of the Seven-Armed Candlestick’ (Arch of Titus), but were also contemporary moneylenders and merchants, even in the atrium of St Peter’s basilica, where in the fourteenth century at least one
bookseller was a Jew (Krautheimer 1980: 266, 299). Granted ‘absolute freedom of the city of Rome’ (Poliakov 1977), Jews were, at the same time, frequently reminded of their distinctive ‘otherness’ through Christian laws, rituals, art, and sermons that insisted that Judaism’s religious relevance and validity had been surpassed by the New Law and the Roman Church (Simonsohn 1991: 122).

Fortunately for Jews, pre-modern Italy was not a homogeneous society. Although their Judaism set them apart, Jews were just one of a large number of regional, linguistic, ethnic, social, occupational, and even religious groups that maintained their distinctive identity in medieval and early modern culture. Forced segregation of these groups was rarely required, but various forms of social and spatial self-segregation were not uncommon in medieval Italian (and Mediterranean) society. In Rome there were many such scholae of the Greeks, Frisians, Saxons, Longobards, and Franks going back to the eighth century (Krautheimer 1980: 78, 82).

Group separation of this type, often enforced, was common in Muslim and Christian trading centres in North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean (Colorni 1956: 55). In southern Italy throughout the thirteenth century populations were very diverse, with ancient communities of Greeks and Slavs, Muslims originally from North Africa and Sicily, and Christians from every part of Italy and many parts of Europe. Initially under Byzantine and Muslim rule and then under Norman and other western Christian rulers, these groups usually lived in ‘fairly demarcated areas’, but these were not ghettos (Abulafia 2002: 76). In Sicily, part of the Muslim legacy was towns where ‘strong quarters, clans, gangs and other local groups remained basic to the urban social structure’ (Lapidus 1984: xii). The Meschita quarter in Sicilian Palermo and the Giudecca of the Apulian port city of Trani, inhabited by important Jewish communities, are among the best preserved and documented of these areas (Figure 1). Later, when southern Italy came under Spanish rule, there were also distinct communities, including those of Jewish refugees from different parts of the Iberian peninsula—a distinction that would also be maintained by Jews in the Sephardi diaspora of the sixteenth century.

There was a tradition of Jews owning property in parts of Italy. For the Byzantine period in southern Italy, Patricia Skinner cites the Jew Theophylact of Taranto, who is documented buying vineyards and other land in 1033 and 1039 (Skinner 2007: 5). Regulations and customs regarding Jews and property varied, however, over time and place in Italy, and these shifts still need to be further researched and established.

The medieval town or city was not unlike a modern one, where groups of immigrants from a particular place, whether a nearby village or a distant country, were likely to live in close proximity through choice or for convenience—as in modern Chinatowns or Little Italies. It was not until the late fifteenth century, however, that enforced separation of social groups became widespread in Italy (Calabi and Lanaro 1998).
The separation of Jews was fully legislated as early as the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, but such separation was rarely enforced in Italy and it began in earnest only with the expulsion of Jews from Sicily and various communities in southern Italy between 1492 and 1569, and with the creation of the Venetian ghetto in 1516 and the ghetto of Rome in 1555. These last moves were intended to make Jews and Jewish quarters marginal rather than integral parts of urban and Christian life.

The Fourth Lateran Council convened by Pope Innocent III has rightly been recognized as a turning point in the lives of Europe’s Jews. The council passed sweeping regulations concerning almost all aspects of the lives of Jews and their communities, and especially those activities in which Jews might interact with Christians. The underlying motive of the decrees was to continually punish Jews for their alleged deicide. Although many of these regulations merely reiterated
older laws that had either fallen into disuse or had been only intermittently enforced, the council for the first time articulated a vision of separate societies for Jews and Christians, and strove to strengthen all provisions to distinguish Jews from Christians when interaction was unavoidable.

The laws passed at the Fourth Lateran Council paved the way for a system of Jewish quarters that were almost entirely forced, rather than voluntary, neighbourhoods. Due to the fragmented political structure and historical prerogatives, however, the top-down effort at separation was slow to develop. Meanwhile, the 1230 law code of Emperor Frederick II offered legal protection for all of his subjects, whether foreign or native born, regardless of race or religion, probably reiterating existing legal practice. Some separation laws, however, remained in force, such as the requirement for Jewish and Muslim men to wear a beard. Frederick moved Jews from a condition of legal ‘marginalization’ to that of ‘toleration’ (Miller et al. 2010: 62).

The security offered by Frederick was shattered at the end of the century: in 1290, under new Angevin rule, anti-Jewish riots throughout Apulia led large numbers of Jews to convert or to migrate northwards. Jews were forcibly expelled in 1291 from the Angevin capital of Naples, where they had lived since at least the sixth century and probably much earlier. A medieval synagogue in Naples was located near the Porta Nova as early as 984 (Capasso 1885: 243), and the city had a vicus Judaeorum that may refer to both a specific place and the particular jurisdiction over it. After the expulsion the synagogue was consecrated as a church (now Santa Maria della Purità) and Jews did not return to the city until after 1444 (Sacerdoti 2003: 182). In 1312 King Frederick III of Sicily tried, unsuccessfully, to have the Jews of Palermo removed to a place outside the city walls. This period also saw the expulsion of Jews from England (1290) and from France (1306).

Only in the fifteenth century, when the widespread preaching of the mendicant orders led to the spread of anti-Jewish sentiment throughout all segments of Italian society, did economic restrictions on Jewish moneylending and the physical separation of Jews became more widely promoted as public policy. In 1427 Giovanna II forced the Jews of Lanciano in the Abruzzi to a single street. Similar, but unsuccessful, attempts were made in Piedmont in the 1430s, and proposals are also known to have been made in Bari, Cesena, and Ravenna throughout the fifteenth century.

In 1493 representatives of the Umbrian Commune of Spoleto went before the Apostolic Governor asking for Jews to be banned from living in streets in the city centre and to be confined to an outlying area far away from Christians, ‘so that the latter shall not be obliged to witness their wicked customs’. The proposal was discussed several times in subsequent years but no decision was made until 1562, when, in a Renaissance version of a ‘final solution’, all Jews living outside the designated ghettos were expelled from the Papal State.
Shared Space in the Medieval City

Despite the decrees of the Lateran Council, throughout the thirteenth century Italian Jews were a legally and popularly recognized element of the social order and an integral part of the urban scene. This was the period when the Jewish quarter of Trani was most actively developed, including the erection of two synagogues of which the larger and more architecturally distinctive one stands on a public piazza. While this was a distinctly ‘Jewish space’ it was not closed to Christians, and the central location could hardly be avoided. Similarly, Jews and Christians (and Muslims) regularly interacted at the busy port, close to the cathedral and the Giudecca.

In 1384 in Siena Jews were forbidden by the city council to ‘stay or live in any house or palace near the Campo’ because they were ‘scorners of the faith of Christ and of the most glorious Virgin Mary’. This expulsion from the main square is an indication that Jews had been living there, and of the subsequent growing animosity towards them (Caferro 1998: 108). In northern Europe Jewish purchase of high-end properties led to resentment and even serious violence. In Italy there was no tradition of the physical destruction of Jewish houses and quarters—as was the case in the Rhineland (Haverkamp 1995: 24).

As with many medieval statutes that attempted unsuccessfully to regulate the behaviour of urban populations, the very fact of the frequent reiteration of restrictions on Jewish–Christian relations can be taken as evidence that those restrictions were often circumvented or entirely ignored.

In the ‘Eternal City’ of Rome, the seat of the pope’s authority, Jews’ age-old but sometimes tenuous place in the social and spatial order was expressed in many ways, including required civic ritual. As part of the recognition of papal sovereignty over the city and its Jews the Jewish community regularly joined the acclamation of the newly crowned pontiff as he travelled along the processional route, the Via Papalis. This Possesso, in which a newly crowned pope would take possession of his episcopal church, St John Lateran, was a recurring event, described in sources from at least 1119 and undertaken with the election of every new pontiff (Krautheimer 1980: 278), but the full medieval procession is most fully described in the late thirteenth century, when Pope Boniface VIII ascended to the Holy See.

After passing through a series of surviving ancient triumphal arches the pope and his lengthy procession stopped at the Tower of Stephen Peteri near Monte Giordano in the rione (district) of Parione (Ridolfini 1971: 8), where he was met by a delegation of Rome’s Jews, led by a rabbi who carried a covered Torah scroll and saluted the pontiff, hoping for continued tolerance of Jewish residence in the city. According to oral tradition, the pope looked at the scroll and passed it back to the rabbi, reciting the words: ‘We acknowledge the law, but we condemn the principles of Judaism; for the law has already been fulfilled through Christ.’
Jews, as a resident population, and like the Mosaic Law itself, were acknowledged in fact but condemned in principle.

After the disgrace and death of Boniface, a similar public expression of allegiance was made in 1312, when Rome’s Jews pledged loyalty to the new emperor, Henry VII. En route to the Lateran basilica (the ceremony avoided St Peter’s church and was performed without papal approval) the procession moved from the Aventine Hill to the Circus Maximus, close to the Jewish quarter, where the new emperor, clad in white and mounted on a white horse, stopped at a bridge (or perhaps some Roman arches), where he swore to protect the Roman republic and its laws. Delegations of clergy welcomed him along the way, and the city’s Jews (who were also taxed to help pay for the coronation) paid homage and handed him a Torah scroll (‘Legem Mosaycam rotulo inscriptam’: see Figure 2).

Jews in other towns of Europe participated in similar rituals, especially in regard to popes and bishops—for example, in Saint-Denis, France, when Pope Innocent II entered the Jewish quarter upon solemnly passing through the town on 27 April 1131 (Coulet 1979). Jews’ involvement in such processions—whether voluntary or coerced—demonstrates social integration as well as recognition of their physical presence as part of the urban fabric.

Jews could also be instigators of processions. In Sicily, at least, we know that they celebrated important life-cycle events with public displays, including processions, and that these events were tolerated and even expected by local non-Jewish communities. The travelling rabbi Obadiah of Bertinoro described a wedding procession in Messina and a funeral in Palermo:

At a wedding which took place near my residence I witnessed the following ceremony. After the seven blessings had been repeated, the bride was placed on a horse and rode through the town. The whole community went before her on foot, the bridegroom in the midst of the elders and before the bride, who was the only one on horseback; youths and children carried burning torches and made loud exclamations, so that the whole place resounded; they made the circuit of the streets and all the Jews’ courts; the Christian inhabitants looked on with pleasure and no one disturbed the festivity. (Obadiah of Bertinoro 1965: 237)

In Palermo, where Obadiah had a lengthy stay, he noted the poverty of the Jews and the richness of the synagogue, and wrote of the funeral rituals and processions, again indicating that Jewish ceremonials traversed common space:

When anybody dies, his coffin is brought into the vestibule of the synagogue and the ministers hold the funeral service and recite lamentations over him. If the departed is a distinguished man especially learned in the law, the coffin is brought into the synagogue itself, a roll of the law is taken out and placed in the corner of the Ark, while the coffin is placed opposite to this corner, and then the funeral service commences and lamentations are recited; the same thing is done with all the four corners of the Ark. The coffin is then carried to the place of burial outside the town and upon arriving at the gate
of the town the reader begins to repeat aloud the forty-ninth and other psalms until they reach the burial ground. (Obadiah of Bertinoro 1965: 237)

Among the most destructive elements of the Lateran Council pronouncements of 1215 were the prohibitions on Jews owning land or living among Christians, and Jewish exclusion from guilds and public office. Jews were also required to wear identifying marks on their clothing, and while they were forced into the profession of moneylending, the new regulation controlled the amount of interest they could charge. Nonetheless, as we can see from the way Jews took part in the procession for Boniface in the late thirteenth century noted above, the Lateran decrees were only partially applied, dependent in large part on the preferences of local rulers. Still, from 1215 a legal basis was established for Jewish–Christian separation which zealous authorities could choose to enforce (Simonsohn 1991: 142).

In Italy especially, but also in the large Jewish centres of southern France and the German Rhineland, Jews and Christians were likely to speak the same language, wear similar clothes, eat similar foods, and live in similar houses within recognizable family units. While popular Christian imagery presented Jews as perpetually wandering, marked by sin in the manner of Cain, in actuality many Jewish communities lasted for decades and even for generations, more...
than enough time for Jewish families to put down roots and become integrated into local economies and communities (Chazan 2010: 185). It was for this reason that the Lateran Council resolved that Jews should wear a special badge to identify themselves—an attempt at urging separation. This helps explain the intermittent enforcement of the Lateran decrees: when Jews looked, sounded, and acted so much like their neighbours, that it was hard to demonize them.

About Rome, historian Robert Brentano wrote: ‘it must be made equally clear that Jews did not live as outlaws or outcasts in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Rome. Jews could be papal physicians, as Isaac ben Mordecai was to Nicholas IV. In the early fourteenth century Jews were rewarded with Roman citizenship’ (Brentano 1974: 46–7). But there was also social and physical tension and even open conflict between Jews and Christians throughout the Middle Ages. Brentano went on to state:

The medieval Roman Jew would seem to have suffered a slight, prejudiced, informal inequality before the law when he was involved in processes not subject to his own law. The thirteenth century was not, to put it mildly, a century of unmixed benefit for the Jews of Western Europe . . . it is absurd to pretend that the position of the Jew in the thirteenth century was an ideal one, one free from persecution, and that bad things only came with the Renaissance. (Brentano 1974: 46)

The inclusion (albeit in a subservient role) of Jews in the papal Possesso demonstrates that Jews and Christians could occupy much of the same civic space throughout the Middle Ages, until this space became contested in the fifteenth century with the expansion of the Christian mendicant religious orders (Franciscans, Dominicans), with their anti-Jewish preaching and the establishment of new forms of moneylending, outside Jewish control. It was in this altered climate that, in 1484, Pope Innocent VIII heeded Jewish requests to allow the papal acclamation ceremony to be moved to a less publicly provocative location, within the walls of the Castel Sant’Angelo. Public space—even in Rome—was no longer easily shared. The last known such ceremony took place in 1513, after which Jews were required to provide costly decoration for the procession route but could not participate.

In general, unlike Jewish communities in England and northern Europe that suffered major persecutions, including massacres and expulsions, from the time of the First Crusade (1096) to the end of the fourteenth century, Italian Jewish communities remained mostly prosperous, physically unharmed, and legally protected until the fifteenth century (M. Cohen 1994: 168). The greatest harassment came from government taxes and increasing anti-Jewish preaching by friars, often despite specific government warnings to the contrary (Miller et al. 2010: 74–5).

It was not the Renaissance, however, but the Counter-Reformation that brought the institution of the ghetto and truly bad things to the Jews of Rome.
Pope Paul IV’s infamous pronouncement stated that on the ‘holy day of lamentation for the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem’ (26 July 1555), all the city’s Jews had to move to the area between Ponte Quattro Capi and the Portico d’ Ottavia, the Piazza Giudea and the Tiber (Stow 1977: 291–8) (Figure 3). The new ghetto area was in Sant’Angelo in the heart of Rome and had long been central to the life of the entire medieval city, not just to Jews. The Jewish quarter occupied a major crossroads where the route connecting the two sides of the Tiber over the Tiber Island—one of only two easy crossings in the city prior to the late sixteenth century—intersected the main river road that connected the northern and southern parts of the city. Merchants, pilgrims, and clerics daily passed this way.

Today’s Trastevere, on the west side of the Tiber, was an area associated with Jews since antiquity, when Philo mentioned that ‘the great section of Rome on the other side of the Tiber is occupied and inhabited by Jews, most of whom are emancipated Roman citizens’ (Levine 2000: 264–5). On the east or city side of the river, as early as the year 1000 there is a reference to a prayer house named for a certain Joseph at Ponte Quattro Capi (Ponte Judaeorum), the bridge over the Tiber Island, and by 1337 a synagogue existed on the Piazza Giudea (Benocci and Guidoni 1993). As Alfred Haverkamp has noted for many German cities, the
central location of Jewish quarters is often an indication of the early settlement of Jews in a town (Haverkamp 1995: 27). Jewish residences, however, were also scattered throughout the city and the move to the ghetto meant uprooting old families and the abandonment of synagogues.

Despite nineteenth-century descriptions of Sant’Angelo as a slum, before it became an enforced Jewish ghetto it was much like other older Roman neighbourhoods. In the early sixteenth century the average Jewish household consisted of five people, about the same as for Christians (Partner 1976: 101), and the medieval domestic architecture of Jews and non-Jews was indistinguishable. Some powerful Roman families also lived in the area and were often allied to local Jewish magnates. Several important Jewish families had converted to Christianity in this atmosphere of physical, and often symbiotic, coexistence, but continued to reside in the area. Notarial documents from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries show that Jews and Christians were often neighbours in the rione, occasionally sharing the same building. They sometimes competed for property and also entered into partnerships.

In Rome and throughout southern and central Italy, Jews and Jewish property are frequently mentioned by name without much further comment in contracts and other types of documents. In Rome, Brentano cites a 1363 notarial document that recorded how Luca de Beccariis, of a prominent Sant’Angelo family, rented a house he owned in the Jewish Street (Ruga Judeorum) for a year to the Jew Sagaczolo di Bonaventura, also of the rione Sant’Angelo. One of the witnesses was a priest, rector of the church of San Lorenzo in Piscinula, located at the edge of the Jewish quarter. Brentano thinks the rent may have been inordinately high, but this may have reflected the cost of living in a desirable district (Brentano 1974: 47). Obadiah of Bertinoro wrote that the Jews of Palermo, though clearly impoverished at the time of his visit in 1487, were ‘all living on one street, which is situated in the best part of the town’ (Obadiah of Bertinoro 1965: 234).

Because of the nature of the Roman documents we mostly know of Jewish–Christian interaction when disputes had to be adjudicated, but these conflicts indicate a relative normality in relations and in access to shared space. In 1238 a priest filed a complaint against four Jewish cloth-makers for throwing their dyes and dirty water out into the street in front of their house, which then ran down in front of the nearby church. The magistri stratarum (masters of the streets) ruled against the Jews, who were told that, if in the future they emptied such dyes into the street, they would have to build an underground covered conduit that would not obstruct the street and that would carry the waste to the main sewer (Brentano 1974: 47; Krautheimer 1980: 284). Though this case involved a priest and Jews it is otherwise a typical land use issue, and the judgment was very similar to those pronounced throughout Italy against those who dirtied or blocked public areas (see Gruber 1990).

In addition to the aforementioned Jewish bookseller and dyers, among the
approximately 1,700 Roman Jews in the early 1500s there were thirty banking firms, doctors and musicians employed at the papal court, as well as tailors, clothiers, vendors of old clothes, furniture, and junk, a soap seller, tripe merchant, and small grocer (Partner 1976: 101).

This mix of professions represents only a small portion of the types of work in which Jews were engaged prior to the restrictions imposed in the sixteenth-century ghettos. According to documents, the most prominent Jews were moneylenders, doctors, or international merchants, but the majority in Italy and elsewhere had more prosaic jobs. Some worked within the Jewish community as religious functionaries and providing kosher food and other material goods. A large number of Jews were doubtless servants, workmen, and clerks within Jewish homes and businesses. Many were small merchants with market stalls and shops, as is indicated by complaints against Jewish shopkeepers in Retimo in 1412 (Lopez and Raymond 1968: 104). Others were craftsmen of fabric, metals, and books. Obadiah of Bertinoro writes of the 850 Jewish families of Palermo in 1487 that they are artisans, such as coppersmiths and ironsmiths, or porters and peasants, and are despised by the Christians because they wear tattered garments. As a mark of distinction they are obliged to wear a piece of red cloth, about the size of a gold coin, fastened on the breast. The royal tax falls heavily on them, for they are obliged to work for the king in any employment that they are given; they have to draw ships to the shore, to construct dykes, and so on. They are also employed in administering corporal punishment and in carrying out the death sentence (Obadiah of Bertinoro 1965: 234–5).

Throughout Europe some urban Jews, and especially rural Jews, maintained farms and vineyards. Some of these were no doubt held by tenant farmers, but some were also probably worked by Jews. The history of Jewish labour in the pre-modern period still needs to be written, but accepting the smaller size of their population, Jews in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries probably engaged in as varied activities as their Christian neighbours (Roth 2003: 180–9).

Co-operation and Confrontation

Beginning in the thirteenth century Jews increasingly settled in central and northern Italy, where they were often invited by local governments that needed them to fill a financial role. At present we have documentation of Jewish presence for fewer than twenty northern Italian towns and cities before the late thirteenth century, but recently Michele Luzzati and others have put the number of places of Jewish settlement in central and northern Italy in the hundreds between the thirteenth and the mid-sixteenth centuries. These communities are thought to have numbered between 15,000 and 20,000 Jews altogether, or approximately 0.2 per cent of the population as a whole (Luzzati 1983: 191).
The Jewish population in Italy continued to expand during the early Renaissance period. This was due in part to natural demographic growth—large families that suffered little violence—and also the increased immigration of Jewish refugees from other parts of Europe into Italy. Native Italian Jews maintained ties to the Jewish community of Rome, where many banking families retained business connections and had family ties. Immigrant Jews tended to concentrate in fewer localities—usually trade centres. They formed their own communities and operated mostly independently of Roman Jewish supervision. Because immigrant Jews were often invited to reside in central and northern Italian towns, and because their numbers were relatively small, there were few real restrictions placed on their behaviour, including their choice of place of residence, until the fifteenth century. The 1384 case of Siena, mentioned above, is an exception, but a harbinger of changes to come.

Jews were often granted citizenship—at least temporarily—in a town, and Italian Jews developed attachments to particular towns and governments. Despite the decrees of the Lateran Council of 1215, they attained real legal, economic, and religious rights and privileges. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, communal governments such as that of Umbrian Todi made special efforts to court and attract Jewish doctors and moneylenders, and their enticements could be quite generous. In Spoleto, Jewish occupations were more varied—Jews were both humble carter and more affluent cloth merchants. In Umbrian Cascia, they were dealers in valuable saffron who travelled the trade routes of central Italy and, like other merchants, leased space to store their goods and stable their horses. Favoured status could be granted by communal governments, and also by tyrants. In Lombardy, Gian Galeazzo Visconti invited Jews to open banks in Cremona, Pavia, Como, and Vigevano, and he appears to have favoured the Jews of Perugia, too (Toaff 1998: 41).

It was common for Jews to have shops on public streets and squares, and they would also set up booths and stands on market days in public places. However, these were often spaces which also had religious associations, particularly because of the placement of images or because they were on the route taken by religious processions. Any public space could, in fact, be defined in religious terms and Jewish presence could create a continuing tension—which sometimes simmered low but could also boil over into violence. The proximity of Jews to processions taking place during Holy Week, for example, was often the cause of anxiety and confrontation. They were expected—and sometimes forced—to close house and shop doors and windows, and even to vacate areas, when Christian religious processions passed their way. Since an important aspect of these processions was the active sacralization of everyday urban space, by their very existence they must be seen—in part, at least—as an aggressive affront to Jews.

At the end of the twelfth century Pope Alexander III had ordered Jews to close their doors and windows on Good Friday, and in 1205 Innocent III complained:
‘on Good Friday Jews walk up and down the streets and public squares, without regard for the age-old custom, everywhere making mock of the Christians who adore the figure of Christ upon the cross, and seeking through their insults to have them desist from their worship’. In the decrees of 1215 there is a more comprehensive ban on Jews in public places during Holy Week: ‘They shall not walk in public on the days of the Lamentation and Easter Sunday, for (as we have heard) some of them do not blush to go out on these days more than usually adorned, and are not afraid to make fun of Christians who exhibit signs of grief at the memory of the most holy Passion’ (Simonsohn 1991: 132).

While we should treat these pronouncements with some scepticism we might also find some truth in them, if not exactly what the popes intended. In the substantial Jewish settlements through southern Italy and in Rome, one can easily imagine a lack of reverence for, or even acknowledgement of, Christian holidays in neighbourhoods filled with Jews. We have also seen that Jewish wedding and funeral processions took place within and without the Jewish neighbourhoods. Lent and Holy Week often coincided with the Jewish celebratory festivals of Purim and Passover (and, a little later in the calendar, Shavuot), which all celebrate God’s intervention to save the Jews in a time of need. These were occasions when Jews dressed up, ate well, and could drink more wine than usually prescribed. At Purim and Passover non-Jewish oppressors (Pharaoh, Haman) are humiliated and ritually ridiculed. Perhaps Christians, especially clergy, viewed these celebrations with suspicion, and even as anti-Christian demonstrations.

Church councils continued to warn Jews to avoid encountering Christian processions carrying the cross or the sacrament, and this remained a constant concern in subsequent centuries. In Savoy in the early fifteenth century Jews were not allowed to appear in public at all during Holy Week, and had to keep their doors and windows shut (Segre 1986–90: 74–5). But Jewish leaders also urged their flock to remain apart from Christian religious rituals. While Christians feared contamination and blasphemy, rabbis, such as the twelfth-century Rabbi Eliezer of Metz (Germany), were concerned that Jews would be lured into Christian worship (J. Katz 1961: 45).

City authorities also made efforts to separate Jews on such occasions. As more and more Christian confraternities were formed in Italian cities, with more and more processions at all times of the day and night, it became nearly impossible for Jews to avoid them—even when, in the sixteenth century, they were confined behind ghetto walls. In Venice in the late sixteenth century the government expressed disapproval of balconies without bars in ghetto houses that faced the Cannaregio, providing a clear view of processions, and in 1625 there were complaints that Jews could look from ghetto windows and ‘blaspheme when the sacraments were carried in processions along the Cannaregio promenade’ (Ravid 1999: 257–9).

Jews, on their part, feared the frequent violence stirred up against them by
Holy Week preachers. They remained closeted at home as required by law and through the desire for self-preservation. Some Jews tried to leave town during this period. Still, there were regular confrontations. The most innocent of these was the sassaiola, a controlled stone-throwing attack that was common on many festive occasions, but sanctioned and ritualized as stoning of Jews’ houses during Holy Week. Historian Ariel Toaff writes that ‘the performance was therefore a game; it had its set script, its rules, which were scrupulously observed by the whole cast, and a rigid framework which left no leeway for spontaneous action’ (Toaff 1998: 181).

As Natalie Zemon Davis has shown in her classic study of misrule, even ritualized performance could get out of hand (Davis 1975: 107), and this was a particular fear for Jews. Such violence was so clearly anticipated that protection from it was often a stated responsibility of the commune in the negotiated terms of Jewish settlement. In 1510 a Jew named Mosè, from Gualdo Tadino, was tried at Perugia for having, in the words of his accusers, ‘the effrontery to stay at home with his family during the Easter triduum, keeping the windows open and standing at the balcony, making mock of the ecclesiastical ceremonies and performing other actions in contempt of the Christians’ (Toaff 1998: 186). Contempt of Christianity was a common enough accusation made against Jews by Christian clerics, though often not upheld by the authorities. However, the Perugia court proceedings indicate that there was some truth in the charge against Mosè. Apparently he and others were watching the Good Friday procession of the Confraternità dei Disciplinati di San Bernardino when someone from the procession began to stone the onlookers. Mosè returned fire, hurling stones and invective against his assailants (Toaff 1998: 186).  

There is much that can be said about this incident and others, but for our purposes it suffices to say that even a Jew’s private residence could become a public space in which he had to follow the rules of public (Christian) decorum. The incident is evidence, furthermore, to support my earlier claim that processions not only did not avoid the houses of Jews but passed right by them—quite possibly as a way of lecturing and humiliating the Jews, and at times provoking them. This was the same strategy that placed churches in proximity to Jewish neighbourhoods—for while it is true that Jews sometimes settled near churches, the reverse was also true, and Christian shrines were installed near Jews in order to confront and convert them.  

As I have mentioned above, Jews also had to cope with Christian images in their midst, often upon their very houses. If Jews removed holy images from houses they rented or purchased without permission there could be dire consequences. In Mantua the Jewish banker Daniele da Norsa was accused of obliterating an image of the Virgin and Child on the wall of a house he purchased, and as a result he was forced to finance the building of a church dedicated to the Virgin, and its altarpiece by Andrea Mantegna, the Madonna della Vittoria.
An anonymous artist painted a second panel, the so-called Madonna of the Jews, in which Daniele and his family are depicted wearing their yellow badges (D. Katz 2008: 44).

A happier outcome was seen in 1449 in Ferrara, where the Jew Abramo obtained permission to cover with cloth some decorative frescoes of saints and prophets in an upstairs room in a rented house where they had been damaged by humidity. Abramo had the foresight to have notaries examine the house and the paintings in order to be relieved of any culpability (D. Katz 2008: 54). In Gubbio in 1471 Samuele di Consiglio bought a house in the San Pietro district on whose outer wall there was a painting of the Virgin and Child, St Anthony Abbot, and St Ubald. He wanted to remove the painting and so consulted the deputy of the local bishop. Permission was given for the image to be scraped off on the condition that Samuele commissioned a similar painting by the same painter—Jacopo Bedi—that would be placed in the oratory of the recently built Fraternità dei Bianchi, or some other suitable place (Toaff 1998). A similar episode occurred in Pisa in 1492 (Luzzati 1983: 137; D. Katz 2008: 54).

Jewish Spaces and Places

Documentary information, much of it compiled by Shlomo Simonsohn and Ariel Toaff, allows us to contemplate ‘Jewish space’ throughout medieval Italian cities, while topographical studies by local historians have begun to identify the locations of Jewish neighbourhoods in Italian towns. Still, for the pre-ghetto period only a small number of medieval buildings have been positively identified as having served Jewish users. These are mostly synagogues, or houses which included spaces for worship, and are thus more fully described in communal documents. More generally, groups of houses in former Jewish quarters have been identified, but specific information about who might have lived in them and when is sketchy.

Many of these places are in southern Italy, where until the end of the fifteenth century the Jewish population was large and long-established, dating to antiquity. When Jews were expelled from Sicily in 1492, it is estimated that 35,000 people, or approximately 5 per cent of the population of the island, left. Jews had lived for centuries in at least fifty localities throughout southern Italy. Many Jewish toponyms can still be found in the region, particularly in rural areas such as Calabria (Vivacqua 1994), where we find Monte Giudei, Casale Giudeo, Acqua Judia, Judio Sottano, Judio Suprano, and other designations remembered long after the passing of the Jews.

Toaff has documented the surprisingly cordial relations between Christians and Jews in Umbria, a region which was the heart of both Franciscan Italy and Italian communal independence. The relative autonomy of cities and towns generally allowed more freedom for Jews, since towns acted first in their own
interest and only acquiesced to larger policies, whether papal or imperial, when absolutely necessary. Assisi may have hosted a Jewish population of 80 to 100 Jews in the second half of the fourteenth century, and current research suggests that this was a substantial number of Jews for any community at the time (Toaff 1979: 27). Important Jewish banks were located in the Porta Santa Chiara district, and contracts are preserved for the construction in 1309 of houses for Mele di Maestro Salomone and Leone di Salomone. But Jews had the run of the town, including access to the great and growing friary of San Francesco. In general, the conventual Franciscans (*fratres minores*) had a tolerant attitude towards Jews; the Assisi friars were treated by a Jewish doctor and even purchased wine from him, and they employed a Jewish ironmonger to restore the roof of the church (we do not know if the Jew needed rabbinic dispensation to engage in the work). Friars of the Confraternity of San Stefano drank and ate at the Osteria del Campo, run by a Jew, and there are other references to Jews working for and with the Franciscan brothers (Toaff 1998: 166). This situation seems to have been relatively normal throughout Umbria, where religious institutions often rented and sold houses and land to Jews, and even provided land for Jewish cemeteries.

With the exception of Rome, Jewish populations were small, often no more than one or two banking families and their retainers. As Robert Chazan has pointed out in the case of northern Europe, the increased specialization of Jewish financial services limited the number of productive Jews within any small city or territory (Chazan 2010: 104). Sometimes—as already mentioned—there were Jewish doctors, though these could also be the same bankers filling an additional semi-civic role. A ‘family’ might easily consist of more than a dozen members, including blood relatives, servants, and employees. Thus, a community of two or more families might provide the *minyan* (quorum) of adult males required for the most important religious services, and the establishment of a synagogue (see below). There is still little evidence for the creation of other specifically Jewish spaces such as *mikvaot* (ritual baths), study houses, or advanced yeshivas, though such places probably existed in Rome, and there were no known monumental structures erected on the scale of the synagogue of Palermo in Sicily, or the thirteenth-century ‘school of the Jews’ discovered in Rouen, in northern France.

It does appear, however, that Jews clustered together. This may have been for practical reasons related to family connection and service, business partnership, and religious worship. Where there was a synagogue, it was natural for Jews to live in proximity for ease of access to prayer—since Judaism requires three prayer services daily—including the morning service likely to be held before sunrise, as well as attendance at the synagogue on the sabbath and numerous festivals. In Perugia many Jews lived in the district of Porta Sant’Angelo, along the via Vecchia (close to today’s University for Foreigners). In Spoleto, Jewish families lived on the via Petrenga, which became commonly known as the ‘street of the Jews’, not
far from the Piazza del Mercato (Toaff 1998: 189–90). This area was so associated with Jews that the nearby church was known as San Gregorio della Sinagoga.

Notarial documents give evidence of Jews renting or purchasing fine houses from Christians in the centres of Italian towns, though exactly which houses these were has not often been identified. In Perugia in the late thirteenth century, the rich banker Matassio da Roma owned a lavish palazzo in the Porta Sole district, on the street leading to the church of Santa Lucia. As late as 1475 the medical officer of Montone (Umbria) lived in a luxurious house owned by the monks of the abbey of San Bartolomeo da Camporeggio, near the palazzo of Count Carlo Fortebracci, lord of the town (Toaff 1998: 172). Other Jews were scattered throughout the city. Wealth, more than religion, seemed to determine one’s area of residence.

Situations were not, however, uniform from decade to decade, and from place to place. They varied depending upon papal policies, changing political and economic fortunes of individual towns and regions, and the rise of minorite orders and their itinerant preachers.

Restrictions on Jewish use of public space were applied, though many seem to be rooted in local circumstance or tradition. A statute of Narni (Umbria) from 1371 states that ‘no Jew, whether man or woman, may live near the fountains and aqueduct of Narni, that is, at a distance of less than twenty-five feet from the same’. Toaff suggests that this restriction, which dates from a period affected by plague, may have been a precaution against Jews contaminating or otherwise compromising the city’s drinking water (Toaff 1998: 124). Overall, given the Jewish ritual need for clean water, it is likely that numerous misconceptions and superstitions arose around Jews and water. In contrast to the Rhineland, where we have been fortunate to discover several substantial mikvaot, such structures are virtually unknown in mainland Italy. One or possibly two mikvaot have recently been found in Sicily, however, where the Jewish population was once very substantial, but overall, little is known of how Italian Jews maintained ritual purity through the creation of their own spaces, or the adaptation of others.

Cemeteries

Public displays of Jewish autonomy in actions or in space were discouraged and often forbidden, especially from the fifteenth century on. While Jews were permitted access to Christian areas, there were few specifically Jewish spaces, and even these could be compromised. The establishment of cemeteries, for example, posed numerous problems. A cemetery was one of the first requirements in any new Jewish community, and negotiating a site for burial was often a delicate matter. Choice of town in which to settle might be determined by access to a cemetery. It was often difficult for Jews to obtain a plot to bury their dead, and when they did it was always outside a town’s walls, often quite distant from where
they lived. Though we are certain that there were many Jewish cemeteries in Italy, we only know the exact location of a small number.

Surprisingly, Jews were often allocated burial sites by the Church. For example, we have a notice from Norman Sicily, where in 1187–8 Guido of Anagni, bishop of Cefalu, ceded to the Jews of Syracuse a tract of land for the extension of their cemetery. This was apparently a lease of sorts, not a sale, requiring an annual payment of olive oil at harvest time (Simonsohn 1997: i. xxxix). Leasing land for cemeteries could cause difficulties, since the land could presumably be reclaimed—putting Jewish burials at risk. We do not know of cases of this happening, however, until the complete expulsion of Jews from a territory, at which time it is presumed the cemeteries were neglected and, in many cases—but at unknown times—plundered for stone (the example of Spain is better documented, where the Crown assumed ownership of cemeteries and sold the stones, while leaving burials untouched and the land open for pasture).

Jews and Christians had very different ideas concerning death and burial. Except for the special case of Prague, pre-modern Jewish cemeteries were not near synagogues. Christians, on the other hand, strove to display holy relics—including body parts of saints—in their churches, and the faithful sought to be buried nearby, either within the church walls or just outside. For Jews, the perceived impurity of churches was one more compelling reason to avoid them. According to historian Robert Bonfil,

In the eyes of the Jews, Christians seemed in fact to idealize the image of the dead god, and therefore not to take a negative attitude toward death; indeed they went so far as to attribute sanctity to the relics of the dead. For the Jews, however, the exact contrary was true—in part because they adhered to the biblical ideal of the impurity of death... in part precisely as a result of their programmatic opposition in principle to what seemed to them the cardinal idea of Christianity. (Bonfil 1994: 280–1)

Jews sought to establish cemeteries away from inhabited areas to avoid contamination, but still close enough to allow prompt burial and regular protection of, as well as care for, the graves. Jews, like Christians, visited graves for a variety of personal and communal reasons; proximity was therefore an important factor, but they were also concerned that Jewish funeral rites should not be easily witnessed by Christians. While Obadiah of Bertinoro does not mention Christian interference with the Jewish funerals he describes, Christians did regularly disrupt and mock Jewish funerals, parodying them in popular theatrical productions.

Even with assurance from communal authorities, it was often difficult to transport the dead for burial in cemeteries outside the city walls. This often had to be done—sometimes by legal requirement—in the dead of night in order to reduce confrontation. Nonetheless, there is a substantial number of documented incidents throughout Italy where Jewish funerals turned bloody when proces-
Sions were attacked en route to the cemetery, as was the case in Perugia in 1446 at the funeral of Elya the Jew (Toaff 1998: 54). Such incidents occurred in Italy even into the nineteenth century (Toaff 1998: 55 n. 66). In the same way that Jews were restricted in the types of everyday clothing they could wear, so too, they were often forbidden from wearing mourning clothes during funeral processions, since this was a privilege not afforded to non-Christians, though exceptions were often made for respected Jewish doctors and bankers.

Synagogues

Only the synagogue could offer Jews a secure place—but even these holy places could be invaded by aggressive preachers and angry mobs. In southern Italy physical and documentary evidence indicates that synagogues were often notable works of architecture and were prominently sited, at least within predominantly Jewish neighbourhoods. A few examples survive. There are two fine masonry synagogues in the Apulian port city of Trani (Miller et al. 2010: 63–9). They were turned into churches, but one of them, the Scolanova, has been returned to a reconstituted Jewish community for use as a synagogue.

Obadiah of Bertinoro described how the synagogue in Palermo which he visited in 1488—in all probability the famous Meschita after which the Jewish quarter was named—was ‘surrounded by numerous buildings, such as the hospital, where beds are provided for sick people and for strangers who come there from a distant land and have no place to spend the night. There is a ritual bath there, and also a large and magnificent chamber where the representatives sit in judgment and regulate the affairs of the community’ (Marcus 1972: 395). Like all the Jewish institutions in Sicily, the synagogue was closed when the Jews were expelled from the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. In Rome, only a small building surviving in Trastevere is likely to have been a synagogue, but there would have been many others (Figure 4). The surviving structure is similar in size and form to Roman houses of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Gruber 2010).

Synagogues in central and northern Italy outside Rome were mostly established in private houses, which either continued to serve as residences or were in a few cases converted entirely to worship and community spaces. Synagogues were often located within the house of the community’s wealthiest Jew, or in another house purchased by an individual Jew, and established for community use. These houses were typical of Italy’s medieval urban centres, and there was no formal distinction between a house used by a Christian and one used by a Jew. Building exteriors were probably indistinguishable from neighbouring houses.

The synagogue of Perugia existed from the mid-fifteenth century until the Jews were expelled from that Umbrian Italian city in 1570. The synagogue (or scola) was located in the fine house (palazzo) in the district of Porta Sant’Angelo,
for which a rent of 7 florins a year was paid to a local nobleman. In 1448 the
community also began to rent an adjacent building. Then both buildings were
purchased by two wealthy Jewish brothers for 200 florins, and the Jewish
community was allowed to continue use of part of the buildings as a synagogue,
but ownership remained with the brothers, who restored and enlarged them for
their own residence (Toaff 1998: 91–3).

In Assisi, the community rented a house for a synagogue until the mid-
fifteenth century. This was probably located close to the Piazza del Comune
(*versus plateam*), near the present Chiesa Nuova, behind the Palazzo dei Priori, on
the site of the so-called birthplace of St Francis (Toaff 1979: 81).

Many Jewish communities were also located in Lazio, within the general
vicinity of Rome. Though we have considerable documentary evidence of their
settlement, few physical traces survive. In Sermoneta (Tetro 1977: 9–26) and in
Campagnolo (Pavoncello 1990: 49) certain houses have been traditionally identi-
fied as synagogues, but without authentication.¹¹
An example of such a house-synagogue is probably illustrated in a miniature from a fifteenth-century manuscript in the Biblioteca Palatina in Parma (Metzger 1982: fig. 121). We see the house of a wealthy Jew. The ground floor is articulated with a wide high arch, typical of the ground floor shops and work spaces of such houses. Two small windows surmount this arch, probably indicating a mezzanine. Above is the *piano nobile* illuminated by three Gothic windows. One can imagine a prayer room possibly set up behind these windows.

No medieval synagogue interiors have survived in Italy, and the description of the Palermo synagogue is the only contemporary detailed written account. An inventory of 1503 from Bologna, published by R. Rinaldi, of the private house of Abramo Sforno, where a synagogue functioned, provides some information: ‘a chapel, or room for prayer with cloth of gold and silk brocade and silver lamps and chains, and lampshades and books left by various persons to the said chapel for the salvation of their souls’ (Toaff 1998: 93). It has long been a custom for Jews to leave gifts to their synagogues upon leaving a community or upon their death,
and this practice is recorded in a few fourteenth- and fifteenth-century wills. As with churches, precious silver and fabrics in synagogues could attract thieves. Such a theft was reported and solved in Perugia (Toaff 1998: 93–4), and should not be seen as a specifically anti-Jewish act as there was no desecration involved and the items were returned—only to be later stolen by Jews!

An even better idea of what the interior arrangement of an Italian house-synagogue might have looked like can be gleaned from a late fifteenth-century Italian manuscript illustration from Emilia. The illustration shows an open room with a tall wooden ark set against one wall and a lower reader’s table before it. To either side of the room is a series of chests or desks at which the worshippers sit, facing the centre of the room. A prayer book (siddur) and a candle burning in a candlestick are placed on each desk. This is a night service—or perhaps early morning. It is dark outside the four Romanesque-style double-light windows. The room is elegant, with a wood-coffered ceiling and a large decorated arch supported on Corinthian columns that create more space than ordinary. Each ceiling coffer is decorated with a painted star. The floor is covered with red ceramic tiles.12

Such synagogues appear, and typically must have served (despite the theft mentioned above), as the most secure and easily identifiable Jewish spaces. Just as Jews were not expected to enter churches under normal circumstances, so too most Christians would not enter synagogues. But there are no Jewish laws prohibiting Christian presence in synagogues—whether during worship or not. At the same time, Christian authorities regularly placed restrictions on Jews employing Christians as servants and on Jews speaking to Christians about religious matters. This did not, however, stop clerics from entering synagogues. In good times they would occasionally attend learned Jewish sermons; at other times they forced themselves upon Jews, preaching conversionary sermons about the truths of Christianity and the falsehoods of Judaism.

Ultimately, for Jews, no place, even the synagogue, was an entirely Jewish space and under Jewish control. With the rise of the Christian preaching orders the synagogue became a contested space between Christians and Jews (J. Cohen 1978; Myers and McMichael 2004). Pope Nicolas III’s papal bull Vineam Sorec of 1278 was addressed to the orders of friars and encouraged preaching to the Jews (Simonsohn 1991: 257–8). We do not hear of such efforts in Italy, but in Spain, where the Jewish population was much larger, Christian preachers were given permission and even urged to preach conversionary sermons to Jews, including in the synagogue. King James I of Aragon promulgated an edict in 1242 ordering royal officials to force Muslims and Jews to attend conversionary sermons. A Hebrew source from around 1250 records the Jewish communal response to such a sermon delivered by a Dominican preacher in the synagogue of Narbonne (Chazan 1980: 255–63).

Incursions into the synagogue were especially promoted by the Aragonese
Benedict XIII, one of several competing papal claimants of the early fifteenth century, and his confessor Vincent Ferrer, the most active of Spain’s advocates of forceful conversion of Jews. Ferrer is said to have forced his way with upraised cross into synagogues in Valencia (1391), Santiago (1408), and Alcañiz (1413) and dedicated them as churches. These policies, however, were in marked contrast to Jewish–Christian relations in Italy, where, after the renunciation of Benedict XIII and the reunification of the papacy at the Council of Constance, Pope Martin V repealed Benedict’s oppressive laws. Nonetheless, Benedict had emboldened mendicant orders across Europe, which increased their anti-Jewish activities.

The Ghetto: A New Kind of Jewish Space

The three centuries between the Fourth Lateran Council and the creation of the Venetian ghetto were a period of remarkable political, religious, social, and economic change throughout what is today Italy, but what was in the Middle Ages a patchwork of often independent and rival cities, states, and kingdoms. While the status of Jews varied from time to time and from place to place, overall this was, as the historian Salo Baron first pointed out in 1928, a period of relative security and prosperity for Jews (Baron 1928; Biale 1994: 9). There were, of course, instances of real acts of violence, but these, while long remembered, were not indicative of the experience of most Jews most of the time.

The consensus among scholars, however, is that tensions over Jewish religious, social, and economic activities as well as public presence increased dramatically in Italy throughout the fifteenth century as a consequence of the anti-Jewish polemics of Dominican and Franciscan friars. This led, in the first half of the fifteenth century, to increased demands that Jews wear a distinctive yellow badge—something required by the Fourth Lateran Council but apparently seldom enforced. It is clear from the calls for the badge that Jews had long been in the habit of frequenting public places without restriction.

Within a short time the definition for Italian Jews of what constituted public space and civic space changed dramatically. Throughout the fifteenth century deliberate and aggressive strategies of confrontation upset the delicate but workable balance of coexistence that had mostly prevailed in Italy for centuries. In some ways this helped strengthen Jewish communities internally, but it marked a very different era in Jewish–Christian relations.

The age of the ghettos began when anti-Jewish rhetoric became action. At first, with the founding of the ghetto in Venice in 1516, a compromise was reached. For Jews to be able to remain permanent residents of Venice, not far from the commercial centre of the Rialto, could be seen as a privilege, not too different from the way Jews had lived in trading cities such as Trani. This arrangement was advantageous to Jews and to many Venetians. Already used to controlling and enclosing different social groups, Venetian authorities found no problem with
confining Jews at night to a recently constructed housing development—the ghetto. For decades Venetian policies towards Jews vacillated between restriction and permissiveness, especially when, after 1541, Sephardi Jews from Portugal and the Ottoman empire could offer expanded trade opportunities.

Pope Paul IV, however, did not understand or accept Venice’s nuanced approach, and he created much tighter legal, social, economic, and physical enclosures around the Jews in Rome and Ancona in 1555. It was this model that spread throughout Italy in the second half of the sixteenth century.

The blurred boundaries often crossed by Jews and Christians in the medieval period became the hard walls and locked gates of the ghetto; in most of Italy these remained intact and oppressive until the mid-nineteenth century.

Notes

This essay was originally presented in the session ‘Civic Spaces in the Renaissance City’ organized by the Italian Art Society at the International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo (10–13 May 2007). I am grateful to Barbara Deimling for inviting me to participate. My essay is part of a larger study of Jewish spaces in Italy in the 16th century, when the first ghettos were created in Venice (1516), Rome (1555), Florence (1571), and elsewhere. I thank Max Grossman for his constructive comments.

1 On the use of this term e.g. in London, see Blair et al. 2002: 15.


3 The antiquity of such supplication ceremonies and suspicions about the intentions and expectations of Jewish participants is evident in the 6th-century writings of Gregory, bishop of Tours. In his History of the Franks Gregory relates how Jews were among those who participated in welcoming King Gunthram, shouting ‘May all the nations honor you and bend the knee and be subject to you.’ Gunthram (according to Gregory) would have none of it, declaring, ‘Woe to the Jewish tribe, wicked, treacherous, and always living by cunning. Here’s what they were after when they cried out their flattering praises to me today, that all the nations were to honor me as master. [They wish me] to order their synagogue, long ago torn down by the Christians, to be built at the public cost; but by the lord’s command I will never do it.’ See Gregory 1969: 189.

4 The fullest account of the solemn possession is in Ordo XIV of Cardinal Jacopo Stefanesci, published in L. A. Muraturi, Rerum italicarum Scriptores ab anno aerae christianae 500 ad annum 1500 (Milan, 1723–51), III, De Coronatione Bonif. VIII. Cited in Gregorovius 1897: 11–12. The essential source on the processions remains Francesco Cancellieri’s Storia de’ solenni possesi dei Sommi Pontefici da Leone III a Pio (1802).

5 According to the Gesta Balduini, c. xiv, ‘Legem Mosaycam rotulo inscriptam sibi porrigen-tibus reddidit Judaeis’. See Gregorovius 1898: 59–60. The scene was also illustrated in the Codex Balduini.

6 Luzzati distinguishes between Jewish settlement, where at least one Jewish family perma-
nently settled for a number of years, and Jewish presence, where Jews are recorded as owning property.

Two major routes of immigration have been traced—one from Rome leading north into central Italy and then to the Po Valley, and one from Germany southwards into northern Italy, and also to central Italy. Other Jews came to Italy from Spain, Provence, France, Savoy, and southern Italy, especially after the expulsions in 1492.

A possible provocation, or at least a misunderstanding, occurred in 1475 when the Jews of Savona were accused of hanging enormous animal entrails ‘inflated and full of filth’ at their windows while the Corpus Christi procession was passing by. See E. Motta, ‘Ebrei in Como ed in alter città del ducato Milanes’, Periódico della Società Storica per la provincia e antica diocesi di Como, 5 (1885), 7–44. Cited in Toaff 1979: 186 n. 65.

Simonsohn’s Herculean work collecting and editing documentary source material on church policies regarding Jews and on Jewish life in Italy, especially in Sicily, provides an essential foundation for the study of Jews in medieval Italy. Toaff has done the same for Umbria, with detailed archival studies of Jews in Assisi and Perugia, but also elsewhere in the region. He has summarized many of his findings in the remarkable Love, Work and Death: Jewish Life in Medieval Umbria (1998), one of the very best books ever written on Jews in the Middle Ages, and a work of which I have made extensive use in preparing this essay.

On Jewish attitudes to death and burial see Ehl et al. 1991; Sáros et al. 1993; Goldberg 1996, and Jewish Theological Seminary of America 1999.

Among the various other towns in which Jews are known to have settled are Civitavecchia, Ariccia, Genzano, Velletri, Frascati, Grottaferrata, Marino, Segni, Palastrina, Genazzano, Tivoli, Campagnolo, Castelnuovo di Porto, and Sacrofano.

The scene is in a mahzor in the G. Weill Collection, Jerusalem, illustrated in Metzger and Metzger 1982, fig. 96.

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