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Spatialising (and visualising) social diversities. Ghettos, synagogues and fraternal societies in early modern Jewish-Christian relations: the case of Papal States

Germano Maifreda*

Abstract

An analysis of the visual aspects of Jewish physical segregation in early modern Italy might clarify how this isolation did not prevent the independent development of Jewish topographic settlements and aesthetic expressions. The existence of connections with non-Jewish cultural phenomena was not impeded, and the adjacent, daily spatial interaction between Jewish and Christian individuals facilitated the transformation of the most open-minded among them into crucial intermediaries and innovators, located at the meeting point of diverse social and intellectual domains. The case of the Papal States can illustrate the intricacies of the relationships between legal and administrative bodies, religious institutions, communities and individuals, and cultural outputs both within and outside the ghettos. These relationships demonstrate a dynamic, varied, and changeable balance. This observation calls into question any oversimplified portrayal of the 'Jew' and also the subtle notion that Jewish history is fixed, as it is often viewed solely through the perspective of persistent discrimination.

* Full Professor, Dipartimento di Studi Storici "Federico Chabod", Università di Milano, via Festa del Perdono 7, 20122 Milano, e-mail: germano.maifreda@unimi.it.

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Un'analisi degli aspetti visuali della segregazione fisica degli ebrei nell'Italia moderna può evidenziare come quell'isolamento non abbia impedito lo sviluppo indipendente degli insediamenti ebraici e delle loro espressioni culturali ed estetiche. L'esistenza di connessioni con fenomeni culturali non ebraici non fu ostacolata, e l'interazione spaziale quotidiana tra individui ebrei e cristiani facilitò la trasformazione dei più aperti tra loro in intermediari e innovatori cruciali, situati nel punto d'incontro di diversi ambiti sociali e intellettuali. Il caso dello Stato della Chiesa in epoca moderna può illustrare la complessità delle relazioni tra organi giuridici e amministrativi, istituzioni religiose, comunità e individui, nonché i risultati culturali delle interazioni ebraico-cristiane tra interno ed esterno dei ghetti. Ciò mette in discussione una rappresentazione eccessivamente semplificata dell'"ebreo" nell'Italia moderna, nonché più in generale la visione della storia ebraica come fissa e marginale, che inevitabilmente emerge laddove è letta esclusivamente attraverso la prospettiva di una persistente discriminazione.

1. *Spatializing diversity in Renaissance Italy*

As is still the case today in *Little Italy* and *Chinatowns* around the world, in premodern Italy since ancient times "ethnic" groups (at the time often referred to as "nations"), but also noble families (think of the Genoese "hotels"), members of religious or civic brotherhoods, as well as professionals and their guilds, tended to settle in homogeneous residential areas in major urban centres. The nomenclature of Italian streets continues today to bear the imprint of these historical divisions, as evidenced by the persistent use of pre-existing *fondachi*, such as those designated for the "Germans" or "Turks". The Italian urban landscape is further characterised by the legacy of settlements belonging to "the Lombards", "Greeks", and "Portuguese", along with the vestiges of noble families and their clientele who exercised dominion over entire neighbourhoods. The streets are also replete with the traces of various merchant and artisanal occupations, including wool merchants, butchers, goldsmiths, and bakers.

At the inception of the Renaissance, Leon Battista Alberti's *De re aedificatoria*, a seminal work on architectural technique, proposed a city layout organised according to classical principles, complemented by the suggestion that

it will also succeed of distinguished ornament to the city to distribute the different workshops of artisans in different zones and special quarters [...]. We will divide the area of the cities in such a way that the outsiders will have dwellings not only separate and made especially for them, but also suitable for our citizens, so that even they may dwell there with all the comforts that the functions and class of each require¹.

¹ Quoted Zaggia 2012, p. 114, mine translation.

Jews, too, already in the Hellenistic and then Roman worlds, and later in Muslim and Ottoman Mediterranean Africa, often spontaneously aggregated around their places of worship and burial. An ancient and widespread urban culture furthermore induced all people to organise themselves through forms of social belonging, gathering around “national” churches or synagogues until they became the foundation of a multilingual and multicultural society that created schools, colleges, oratories, residences and courts dedicated to each “nation”, profession or religion.

In the regions of southern Italy under Byzantine, Norman, and Muslim rule, Jews and members of other ethnic groups often resided in delineated areas. Illustrative examples of this phenomenon include the Palermo *meschita* and the *Giudecca* of Trani, which have endured to the present day in remarkable condition. These were not enclosed areas: two clearly visible synagogues were erected in Trani in the late Middle Ages, the largest of which was erected on a public square that put it in daily contact with Jews and Christians. It is evident that both communities engaged in frequent interactions with Muslims in the vibrant port, situated in close proximity to the cathedral and the *Judecca*².

In north-central Italy, the only region of the peninsula to have witnessed a Jewish presence subsequent to the 15th- and 16th-century Spanish expulsions from Sicily and the Kingdom of Naples, *giudecche* occasionally constituted topographical antecedents of ghettos. In Renaissance Verona, for instance, where, as was already the case in Padua and Vicenza, there were *contrade* in which Jews preferred to reside despite the absence of specific obligations, the very fact that they «stood all coiled up in some houses of a *contrada*» (as was recalled by the local City Council in the late sixteenth century) proved to be a precedent when establishing the local ghetto³.

However, this was not universally applicable, particularly given the role of “national” differences among Jews in the context of urban dislocation. In the early fifteenth century in Treviso, “German” Jews resided in proximity to the *Duomo*, “Italian” Jews in San Giovanni, and the “French” ones in San Nicolò. As was the case in eighteenth-century Casale Monferrato (where the boundaries of the enclosed enclosure in 1741 were identified in today’s Via Roma, Via Balbo, Via Vigliani-Santa Croce and Piazza San Francesco), it is possible that the Christian municipal or governmental authorities claimed that in the area «presently inhabited most part of their nation»⁴. However, subsequent in-depth studies have revealed that the Jewish population of Casale Monferrato actually resided in other areas of the town, as well as in the countryside.

² Abulafia 2002, p. 76.

³ Zaggia 2012, pp. 108-110, also for the information on Treviso that follows.

⁴ See Pilocane 2013.

As is also the case with Christian and Muslim families and professionals, Jews tended to congregate in small, compact territorial groups for a variety of cultural, psychological, and practical reasons. These communities offered a space for individuals to speak their own language and identify with a shared heritage, fostering a sense of unity and support. The creation of friendships and kinship bonds was also facilitated, as was the sharing of religious spaces and services, adhering to norms that ensured a certain degree of physical distance between communities and dwellings. Furthermore, these communities enabled the strengthening of business relationships, the development of forms of solidarity and hospitality, and the establishment of mutual support systems in times of need. Additionally, these communities allowed for the fulfilment of norms set by Christian authorities, or simply enabled the adaptation to the pre-existing topographical and professional structure of the city. The fundamental difference between medieval neighbourhoods, which were distinguished by ethnic, familial or professional affinities, and Jewish ghettos, which emerged in the sixteenth century, lies in the fact that residence in the former was not legally obligatory⁵.

2. *Topographies of seclusion: the genesis of ghettos*

Ghettos were areas of compulsory residence for Jews instituted by Christian rulers. They were surrounded by walls and gates that were opened at dawn and closed at sunset by Christian authorities. It is important to note that ghettos were an Italian invention. The establishment of the first ghetto in Venice in 1516 came as something of a surprise to the local Jewish settlement, who initially regarded it as a provisional measure that they would readily surmount. The decree issued by the Venetian Senate mandated the immediate relocation of all Jewish families to a former industrial area (today's *Ghetto novo*), characterised by its seclusion and economic deprivation, situated at a considerable distance from the political and commercial hub. The uncertainty surrounding their long-term residency in this area was a source of concern. However, the removal of the previous Christian inhabitants and the strict rules imposed on the new dwellers allowed them a certain optimism, a sentiment that would soon be vindicated by the events that transpired. The first ghetto in Venice endured for a period exceeding three centuries; in other regions of

⁵ The exceptions, even in this, are not lacking: in Pisa in the late Middle Ages Jews were obliged to reside in the alley known as *classus Iudeorum*, which, however-unlike modern ghettos-was not interdicted to Christians and was not enclosed by walls: see Luzzati 2005. In Genoa, even after the establishment of the ghettos, some Jews were allowed to live outside them (see Zappia 2021, p. 93).

the Terraferma Veneta, however, the Jewish population was eradicated, with only a small number of larger communities and a handful of minor dioceses and seignorial fiefs managing to persist. Distinctive features and the spirit that informed its creation may offer a rationale for this success and differentiate it from the other typical Italian ghettos, which were erected forty years later⁶.

The early modern history of Rome's Jews is inextricably linked to the fluctuating and complex history of Jewish-Christian relations, as well as to the reciprocal evolution of both groups within the city's landscape. From a Jewish perspective, this ancient community's presence, originating in the era of the Roman Republic and flourishing in papal Rome, represented millennia of resistance. This culminated in the establishment of an autonomous political self-government structure at the beginning of the 16th century, negotiated with the popes and the papal Curia, with the successful banker Daniel da Pisa playing a central role in this process. After large numbers of refugees arrived in the city in the late 15th and early 16th centuries, he organised the community and established eleven synagogues. The banker also wrote a constitution for the community and submitted it for approval. Pope Clement VII gave it official approval in his bull dated 12 December 1524. The *capitoli* became binding on the community, which was divided into two factions: the 'Italians', who were the permanent residents of Rome and the old affiliates, and the newcomers who arrived 'beyond the mountains' (the Alps), including the Ashkenazim and exiles from southern Italy, under the rule of the Catholic Monarchs, Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella I of Castile.

Scholars of Jewish history have traditionally interpreted the second half of the sixteenth century in Rome as a period of transition between a previous, largely positive phase marked by the Renaissance, and the progressive anti-Jewish hardening of the Counter-Reformation. This culminated in the establishment of the ghetto in 1555. However, in recent years, the history of Rome's Jewish community has been at the centre of renewed historiographical interest, leading to a reorientation of studies. Particular attention is now being paid to the organisation, social structure, politics, and culture of the community before and after the ghetto, as well as to the cultural phenomenon of Christian Hebraism⁷.

The ghetto of Rome was established in the fall of 1555 in the rione Sant'Angelo, encompassing a number of streets located between the now-vanished Piazza Giudea (approximately the present *Piazza delle Cinque Scole*), the still-present remains of the Portico d'Ottavia and the bank of the Tiber near the Tiber Island. It is noteworthy that the Jewish population, which also migrated to the area in large numbers, did not at that time modify the institutional framework

⁶ Segre 2021; Segre 2025.

⁷ Di Nepi, Zappia 2025.

of the community established just thirty years earlier by the agreements meticulously concluded by Daniel da Pisa. This historical precedent underscores the absence of a direct correlation between the enclosure of Jews and the establishment or restructuring of community arrangements. In terms of continuity with the previous compact, the primary concern was the reopening of internal rifts and conflicts, which were perpetuated by the division of the community into “ethnic”, (Sephardic, Mizrahi, Ashkenazi, “Italians” etc.) economic, and social entities. This would have undermined the Jews’ ability to present a unified front to external authorities, specifically the papal authorities in the *Urbe*⁸.

Life in the seraglio gave rise to profound internal conflicts surrounding the division and utilisation of space, as well as tensions arising from the reduction of the *Scole* (from eleven to five in a single building) mandated by papal bulls⁹. However, the political imperative to compact in order to survive prevailed over any external pressures that might have been countervailing, as evidenced by the maintenance of order based on the Congregation of Sixty and the Three Factors. The challenges faced by the Roman Jewish community, both institutionally and communally, commenced in the early seventeenth century with the pontiffs’ decree that the *ius commune* should be utilised in the adjudication of internal disputes within the community. This shift effectively eliminated the possibility of consensual arbitration, a practice often facilitated by rabbis, which, as will be elaborated upon subsequently, served as the autonomous resolution of disputes among Jews, encompassing matters such as credit, taxation, and internal trade within the ghetto. This loss of capacity for self-government would reach its zenith in 1682 with the papal decision to close the retail lending stores in the Roman claustris, which resulted in the severe impoverishment and “enduring prostration” of the Community over the subsequent century¹⁰.

It is imperative to posit a general theme that, once again, situates the history of the Jews at the centre of the Italian historical landscape in its entirety. That is, the unavoidable role that was played by the spiritual and temporal authority of the Roman Church, which emerged from the Middle Ages, on the political and economic developments, and on the social and cultural transformations, of the peninsula in the modern era; as well as, naturally, on Christianity and Catholicism on a global scale¹¹. Within this extensive context, it is imperative to acknowledge the pivotal role of Rome, while maintaining a discerning perspective regarding the intricate tapestry of events that profoundly influenced Europe between the first and second millennia.

⁸ Di Nepi 2021; Maifreda 2021; Borýsek, Liberatoscioli 2024.

⁹ Maifreda 2024.

¹⁰ Stow 1992; Stow 2014. The definition of “enduring prostration” is in Milano, 1992², p. 293.

¹¹ Terpstra 2015.

Extensive research in this area continues, and several debates remain open. With respect to the Middle Ages, it is noteworthy to cite the seminal work of Giacomo Todeschini, which has recently brought to light hitherto unexplored aspects of papal intervention in relation to the economic activities and social roles of Jews during pivotal centuries, such as those encompassing the dissolution of the imperial framework and the rise of the charismatic hierarchy of the Bishop of Rome over a temporal state under his leadership¹².

The period between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries saw the consolidation of the legal and intellectual character of peninsular Christianity, which was then on an equal footing with that of the Jews. It was during this time that the foundations for the papal policy towards the Jews were established. This period marked the establishment of an insecure equilibrium, characterised by the interplay between assurances of protection and proscriptions on Jews from performing specific public functions or maintaining close proximity to the Christian majority. This equilibrium emerged as a consequence of apprehensions regarding the potential for religious syncretism and conversions from Christianity to Judaism, particularly during the period between the fifth and tenth centuries. This era, characterised by vulnerability and identity fluidity within Western Christendom, witnessed the formulation of this delicate balance.

It is also important to place the subsequent cultural and topographical development of relations between Jews and the Roman Church on this vast stage, of which the famous theory of Augustine of Hippo (354-430), based on Paul of Tarsus' letter to the Romans, was an emblematic expression. According to this theory, the Jewish people played a pivotal role in the salvation of Christians, as their refusal to accept Jesus as Messiah demonstrated their misunderstanding of the truth and served to strengthen the Christians in their own beliefs. Within this paradigm, the role of the Jews assumes a central position at the moment of the final judgment, when the conversion of all non-Christians will enable the establishment of the divine reign of Christians. This formed the intellectual basis for medieval, and later modern, Christianity's acceptance of the Jewish cultural and physical "area of diversity" and inferiority. The physical existence of this area in a city such as Rome was in fact uninterrupted over the millennia, and continues to this day¹³.

The theological vision under discussion has been shown to take on concrete meanings even in the early modern age. This is evidenced by the fact that, at times when the Jewish presence in Rome was concretely threatened in its very existence, as for example during the plague of 1656, the pontiffs did not aim

¹² Todeschini 2018, to which reference should be made for the author's extensive bibliography.

¹³ Foa 2004³, p. 22.

to annihilate it. On that occasion, the city authorities, shielded by the clergy, implemented and supervised the daily enforcement of stringent lockdown and feeding rules from outside the ghetto, forcing the population to remain within its confines. This is documented in contemporary Jewish chronicles, including those of Rabbi and physician Ya'hakov Zahalon (1630-93). Consequently, the number of fatalities was confined to approximately 800 individuals, constituting approximately 20% of the total population of 4,000 inhabitants within the confines of the claustr¹⁴.

The Christian political-theological approach, which was at once protective and delimiting of the presence of Jews, prevented the massacres perpetrated in the French and German areas by Crusader expeditions in the transition between the 11th and 12th centuries. This occurred within a context of flourishing Jewish intellectual life and widespread territorial presence in Italy, as evidenced by historical sources such as the *Itinerary* of Benjamin of Tudela and the Talmudic lexicon *Arukh* by Nathan ben Jahiel from Rome (c. 1100). Notably, the *Arukh* stands as the sole extant literary work of peninsular Jews from the 11th century, a time period marked by the loss of numerous Jewish texts¹⁵.

The approach of ecclesiastical and secular powers (even if consecrated, such as emperors and kings) that was founded here has been termed “legal contradiction, but also narrative contradiction”. This marked the following Italian centuries in a radically different way from other European countries. This contradiction resulted in the Jews of Italy evolving into a distinct entity, yet they were progressively assimilated into what would eventually become Italian society. They were considered eligible, yet their legal and symbolic status remained undefined. This ambiguity stemmed from the uncertainty surrounding the limits and forms of the decision-making power that rulers could exercise over them¹⁶.

The papal policy of the late Middle Ages, which was characterised by a shift in approach towards the protection of Jews, encompassed a series of measures. These included the imposition of distinctive “signs” on Jewish attire, the establishment of the Inquisition under the authority of pontiffs, the introduction of the concept of “Judaization” as a criminal offence, and the oversight of Jewish literature. This culminated in the thirteenth century in France, where the works of Maimonides and the *Talmud* were burned under pressure from the newly formed Mendicant religious orders¹⁷.

¹⁴ Veltri 2020.

¹⁵ A former cloth merchant, Nathan ben Jahiel received from the Capitoline Community, together with his brothers, the governance of the local *yeshivah*. In 1085 he had a *mikweh* (ritual bath) built; in 1101 he advocated, along with his brothers, the erection of a new synagogue. See Veronese 2012.

¹⁶ Todeschini 2018, p. 69. On the subsequent topic of usury see *ibid*, pp. 67-85.

¹⁷ Foa 2004³, pp. 10-50; Foa 2011. On the Jewish distinctive sign(s) see Cassen 2014; Capriotti 2015.

The structural ambiguity of Roman policy towards Jews in the first half of the second millennium resulted in the establishment of ghettos in the 16th century. This phenomenon manifested exclusively within the confines of the Western Catholic world, conspicuously absent from the Protestant continental sphere. It was concomitant with what has been delineated as a veritable “conversionist obsession”, characterised by the escalating ecclesiastical pressures directed not solely at the religious proselytism of Jews, but also Muslims and adherents of other non-Catholic Christian denominations.

This phenomenon is emblematic of the intricate intertwinings between Jewish history and general history, particularly within the context of Italy. This is due to the fact that, on the one hand, the drive for conversions is characterised in the Counter-Reformation as a period of political and institutional tension, internal to Catholicism, towards a contraction of the spaces of otherness, cultural and otherwise. On the one hand, it is seen as a response to the challenges posed by the Protestant Reformation, geographical, colonial and missionary explorations, and the increasing movement of people, goods, money, technologies, political models, and lifestyles in the course of what is beginning to be called the First Global Age. On the other hand, it is to be seen in relation to the advent of an increasingly less monolithic society, as an outcome of the Counter-Reformation¹⁸.

These changes in the general scenario – the anti-Protestant battle; the entrenchment of a Roman curia incapable of implementing the reforms necessary to respond to the demands raised by Luther; the dynamisation of the economy and society – in the second half of the sixteenth century prompted the change in the popes’ policy towards the Jews, made evident in their States by the construction of the ghettos in Rome and Ancona and the export of this model throughout the Italian peninsula in the following centuries.

Ancona may also serve as a salient exemplar of this phenomenon. For centuries, a Jewish community had been present and organised within the city. Following the gradual incorporation of the Marca into the Papal States, a process that concluded in 1532, and despite the invitations extended by Popes Paul III (1534-1549) and Julius III (1550-1555) to the international circles of the New Christians, or the Levantine and Portuguese Jews, the situation for the Jews continued to deteriorate. As was the case in Rome, Pope Paul IV in 1555 imposed segregation within the ghetto, the compulsory sale of real estate, prohibitions and the obligation to wear a sign.

The situation was further exacerbated by the persecution of the Portuguese Jews. Those – approximately eighty – who did not manage to escape to Pesaro or Ferrara were imprisoned in inquisitorial prisons; those who did not manage

¹⁸ Marina Caffiero has worked extensively on the ‘conversion obsession’: see initially Caffiero 2014, esp. at pp. 95-103 and 112-121, quote from p. 112. On periodization see Marcocci 2014.

to escape by bribing the papal commissioner, or to convert a second time, in this case also involuntarily, to Catholicism after torture, were condemned to forced labour or death. A tragic series of *auto da fé* (public executions) held in today's Piazza Enrico Malatesta devastated the city's Jewish community between April and June 1556, leaving an indelible stain on Jewish-Christian relations in the centuries that followed. Port traffic suffered a protracted setback, attributable to the bankruptcy of the companies managed by the Jewish converts (the so-called Marranos) and the Ottoman Empire's organised reprisals¹⁹.

Cognisant of the inextricable linkage between commercial activities involving leather and textiles, which were predominantly conducted by Jewish-run enterprises operating between the Mediterranean and the Middle East, and the economy of the Papal States, certain pontiffs in the latter half of the sixteenth century endeavoured to repair the fractured relations. Pius IV (1559-1565) repealed or mitigated the anti-Jewish measures implemented by his predecessor, including the obligation to wear a distinctive sign, the prohibition on owning property, and the limitations on other economic activities. Notably, Clement VIII (1592-1605) revived the privileges of the commercially pivotal 'Levantine' Jews, to whom Paul V (1605-21) guaranteed a consul for the linguistic patronage of causes and granted them the possibility of moving within the territories of the Papal States, even where other Jews had been or had been expelled. Furthermore, the popes granted the Levantines in Ancona the privilege of erecting a synagogue distinct from the ghetto, as well as the prerogative of presenting their spiritual concerns directly to the bishop of Ancona (rather than the inquisitor) and the local governor, with the exception of cases involving capital punishment. Finally, the Levantine Jews were exempted from ordinary and extraordinary taxes imposed on Jews, as they were able to negotiate their tax status separately from the other Jews gathered in the community²⁰.

This complex normative-spatial evolution is consistent with the interpretation of the interactions between Jewish communities and Christian powers in the early modern period, as evidenced above. The distribution of negotiating power within the Jewish community effectively structured the settlement into two discrete political and spatial components: the Levantine and the 'Italian' (which also housed a small German community that possessed its own synagogue). These components exhibited divergent privileges, weights, and internal and external policies. This further corroborates the notion that a singular mode of Jewish identity was nonexistent during this period; rather, the multifaceted nature of Jewish identity was the consequence of a dynamic interplay between enduring historical and physical frameworks, ongoing negotiations between Christian and Jewish powers, and highly contextual arrangements.

¹⁹ Segre 1985; Ravid 2012.

²⁰ Leoni 2000, pp. 27-97.

3. *Spatial porosities*

A substantial corpus of research has highlighted how Jews in the ghetto, even in Rome, implemented a series of adaptations to limit the damage or circumvent segregation measures²¹. Even outside the gates, there were spaces in the *Urbe* that were regularly frequented or even owned by Jews, either individually or in collectives. In addition to the Jewish cemeteries located on the Aventine, at Porta Portese and in Monteverde, a synagogue was situated outside the enclosure from its inception. It was located within a space, also enclosed, known as the “ghettarello”, situated near the Theatre of Marcellus. The so-called Scola della Porta (or Portaleone) remained active until 1735, when the Roman Inquisition decreed the closure of the area and its synagogue. At that time, the second enclosure was home to approximately 180 individuals who engaged in the operation of grain stores, ovens, and stables, with the intention of providing support to the most impoverished segment of the Roman Jewish population.

It is also worthy of note that Jewish stores and dwellings were located outside the district reserved for them in the *Urbe* until the nineteenth century. For instance, we find evidence of textile stores with Christian attendants, despite the regulations forbidding such practices. Furthermore, there were Jewish-owned churches involved in preaching to Jews, such as that of Sant’Angelo in Pescheria. While this church, like any other majority sacred space, was theoretically precluded from them to avoid desecration, in practice, this was not always adhered to.

The inhabitants of the ghetto also regularly frequented the hospitals, where they carried on the business of acquiring and reselling clothes, textiles and objects of deceased persons, the so-called *fordelli*. This market was found to be far richer and more profitable than previously thought, primarily due to the apparent residuality of the term *strazzeria*, which is used in papal bulls and sources from that period to denote the buying and selling of used objects. Conversely, in preindustrial times the reuse of household objects was pervasive, giving rise to extensive and highly coveted commercial circuits. A notable example of this phenomenon is provided by the bequest of Cardinal Giovanni Morone, who died in Rome in 1580. A significant portion of his furnishings, precious fabrics, tapestries, clothes, textiles, and jewels were purchased in the days immediately following his death by antiquarians, junk dealers, and Jewish revisers. The list of buyers kept by the cardinal’s heirs is impressive, and indicative of the desirability that trade held at the time²².

²¹ Also at the forefront in this direction was the work of Kenneth R. Stow, including the extensive publication of sources that flowed into Stow 1995-97; see also initially Foa, Stow 2000, Aron-Beller 2019.

²² Firpo, Maifreda 2016.

In Rome, Jews were also known to frequent various tribunals, including those of the Cardinal Vicar at the Basilica of St. John Lateran and of the Inquisition near St. Peter's. Moreover, they were summoned every Saturday to listen to compulsory sermons in oratories such as Santissima Trinità dei Pellegrini and Santa Maria del Pianto. Additionally, they were present in the Houses of the Catechumens, the College of the Neophytes, and the Monastery of the Convertite nuns on the Corso. In the context of the weekly market in Piazza Navona, a specific segment of the Jewish population was granted the privilege of occupying designated spaces for the display of goods. The acquisition of these spaces was often the subject of intense competitions and disputes with Christian traders. The economic activities of the Jews in the Castelli Romani were of such significance to the popes that they were considered indispensable²³.

In the city of the popes, the presence of Jewish representatives was anticipated in civic events of high visual and symbolic value. A particularly noteworthy instance of this was the ceremony marking the enthronement of a new pontiff, as observed in the opulent procession that traversed the city from St. Peter's Basilica to St. John's. During this event, the local populace, predominantly comprising the inhabitants of the cloister, amassed in the vicinity of the Arch of Titus, in close proximity to the Colosseum. The arch was adorned with banners inscribed with celebratory messages, creating a vibrant atmosphere of festivity and community pride. A delegation from the Community participated in the installation of the city magistrates in the Capitol, at the Palazzo dei Conservatori. During the games of Agone and Testaccio and the "palio dei Judei", which took place during Carnival, some Jews were encouraged to parade in front of the pontiff in a manner that may be perceived as humiliating from a modern perspective. However, it should be noted that in certain periods, these Jews voluntarily participated in these parades, thereby highlighting the significance that the control of public space held for them, as well as for other "nations". These performances were superseded, in the mid-15th and late 17th centuries respectively, by monetary contributions²⁴.

The evidence therefore suggests a rather pronounced visual Jewish presence in the public space and markets of modern Rome, which, when considered alongside the very importance of the cloister and its dynamics in the urban fabric, and the very dense interweaving of personal relations between Jews and Christians that is well documented even in the city of the popes, makes the identification of the "age of the ghettos" as a moment of profound rupture in the past of peninsular Jews less obvious. However, these elements do not solely reveal the dynamics of two distinct social groups.

²³ Caffiero 2014, pp. 105-107; Militi 2007.

²⁴ Prosperi 1996.

The eschatological and theological conception of Western Christianity has identified the presence of Jews as an indispensable prerequisite to the salvation of Christians and all humanity from the beginning. In turn, Jewish identity has been perpetuated in history primarily through the active demarcation of its own diversity. Not only did the Jews' internal drive for distinction and the Christian majority's external drive for their separateness coexist, but these two forces were complementary with respect to the Jews' goal of perpetuating the possibility of continuing to exist as distinct.

Consequently, an exclusive focus on the concept of "intolerance" and "discrimination" in analysing the topographical and visual phenomenon of the ghetto in early modern Italy results in an oversight of its profound historical significance. The Italian nation emerged from the symbiotic relationship between the sociocultural history of the Catholic majority and the active choice of the Jewish community – the only religious minority permitted to practise their faith openly before the French Revolution – to maintain separation as an integral part of their identity and heritage, and as a means of safeguarding it. This distinct self-perception manifests itself in numerous concrete ways: In the realm of communal self-government (whereas, in the case of Christians, this is exercised at the city, monarch or state level); in the temporal structuring of day and week (illustrated by sundown, Shabbat); and in the diversity of food and the cultural construction of the category of purity. The diversity of food and cultural constructions of the category of purity is also worthy of note, as are the different conceptions of the sacredness of spaces, which are based on ascribed functions (in the case of the synagogue) and not on physical immanence (as in the case of the church). Finally, the absence of a division between lay and consecrated, with rabbis being neither priests nor priests but rather jurists and teachers, is also a salient factor.

By disregarding the entire historical development of the coexistence of two religions on a territory with a Christian majority, and on the soil of a state that, according to the 1848 Albertine Statute, would designate Catholicism as the "sole religion of the state", we overlook the pivotal role that the active existence of the other plays in the construction of both religions and, consequently, both self-perceptions.

4. *Tracing visual interactions: between synagogues and societies*

The synagogue, the focal point of communal life following the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, is referred to in Hebrew as *bet ha-kneset*, meaning "meeting house". In early modern Italy, as today, it functioned as a space for collective prayer and the public (aloud) reading of the Torah in front of a minimum of ten adult males, conducted from a pulpit (*bimah*). The scrolls of the

Torah were meticulously prepared and copied by hand, adhering to stringent ritual guidelines, and were then adorned with *rimmonim* ('pomegranates'), the magnificent tips of which are now preserved in leading museums worldwide. The scrolls are stored in the heart of the synagogue, the sacred wooden ark, whose oldest dated and surviving example in the world is the one consecrated in 1472 in Modena and donated by Elhanan Refa'el ben Dani'el. The scrolls are stored within a monumental, tall and narrow cabinet, the structure of which culminates in a crenellated decoration that makes it resemble a tower²⁵.

The significance of the synagogue extended beyond its religious connotations. Typically, these edifices encompassed spaces dedicated to both spiritual contemplation and communal activities. In the context of smaller Jewish settlements, the documentation of specific apparatuses such as the ritual bath (*mikvaot*), literacy schools, and more advanced religious studies is comparatively limited, with such institutions being predominantly found in major urban centres²⁶.

The various "ethnic" components of peninsular Jewry utilised different "schools" or synagogues, which in turn influenced the topographical distribution of dwellings. In Rome, where even the so-called *ultramontane* Jews aggregated into a single communal organisational framework, unlike in Venice, there was a Spanish school, divided in turn into Catalan, Aragonese, and Castilian, to which were added Sicilian, French, and German. In order to comply with the stipulations set out in Paul IV's 1555 bull, which established the ghetto and prohibited Jews from possessing multiple synagogues, these congregations were able to locate a single building in today's Piazza delle Cinque Scole. Each synagogue was endowed with its own financial reserves, welfare institutions, and administrative structures. When their representatives convened to deliberate on matters affecting the entire Jewish settlement, they constituted the so-called *Communitas omnium Hebraeorum in Urbe commorantium*. This assembly was regarded as the sole legitimate representative, entrusted with the privilege of officially liaising with the papal authorities through its elected officials²⁷.

Access to the synagogue was plural, reflecting a composite and multifaceted communal reality. And the linguistic and cultural subtleties of the forms of communication that took place within the synagogue were such that they were almost entirely inaccessible to individuals from different backgrounds from those to whom the synagogue addressed itself. The number of non-Ferrarese Jews, and even more so Christians, who would have comprehended these ser-

²⁵ Contessa 2019, pp. 159-161. Sculpted, inlaid and painted walnut, velvet and silk, 265 x 130 x 78 cm., the Modena ark is displayed today at the Musée d'art et d'histoire du Judaïsme in Paris on permanent loan from the Musée de Cluny, Musée national du Moyen Âge, Paris; Rothschild donation, Strauss donation.

²⁶ Gruber 2014, p. 112.

²⁷ Caffiero 2017; Lattes 2021.

mons delivered by the local rabbi Mordechai Dato in the vernacular during the sixteenth century would have been, for example, negligible:

And then that with the mylah, which was made ‘Abraham ‘avynū, was zoqeh and the nešamah, which is hazūah by that third degree of the ‘azylūt, which is called bynah, which is signified in the first he of the two hehīn that come in the šem hanikvad šel ben ‘arba’ ‘otiūjot, wherefore God added this littra he in the name of ‘Abraham thus saying to him: [...] ‘Abram, which is the name in which you were called while you were ‘arel, and therefore I do not want that name to be called to you anymore [...].²⁸

The dialectal variety of contemporary Jewish sermons continually merged with Hebrew in its various nuances, generating linguistic hybridizations, Italianate conjugations of Hebrew verbs, mixing of Kabbalistic concepts and cast translations of rabbinic production²⁹.

Aggregative realities such as confraternities or philanthropic, charitable and welfare organisations, corresponding to similar coeval Christian realities, also operated in the ghettos on an “ethnic” basis, thus complicating the mosaic of internal differentiation within the universitates. In Bologna, which had fallen under Papal jurisdiction a few decades earlier, an early example of this complexity can be seen in the establishment of a Jewish confraternity known as the *Nizharim* (diligent, zealous) in 1546. The primary function of this organisation, as outlined in its surviving statutes, was religious in nature, centring on the observance of the three fundamental precepts of *Torah* study, communal prayer, and acts of charity. From the year following its establishment, women were also fully welcomed. In the eighteenth century, the Jewish fraternities in Rome reached a membership of approximately forty³⁰.

The fraternities, known generically as *hevrah* or *havurah* (society, company), were sometimes elitist realities. They enabled prominent families in the ghetto to influence spiritual and social life by emancipating themselves from the power of the rabbinate. These fraternities were not merely places of prayer; they were also centres for discussion and, in the 18th century, for the consumption of coffee and hot chocolate.³¹ Jewish fraternities also flourished in the former Ferrara territories, playing a vital role even in the cities that remained with the Dukes of Este after the devolution to the Papal States in 1598. In Modena (where the ghetto was established in 1638) and Reggio (where it occurred in

²⁸ «E poi che con la mylah, che si fece ‘Abraham ‘avynū, fu zoqeh e la nešamah, che è hazūah da quel terzo grado de lo ‘azylūt, che si chiama bynah, il quale viene significato ne la prima he de le dui hehīn che vengano nel šem hanikvad šel ben ‘arba’ ‘otiūjot, per ciò agginse Iddio questa littra he nel nome de ‘Abraham così dicendogli: [...] ‘Abram, che è il nome nel quale eri chiamato mentre eri ‘arel, e però non voglio che più quel nome te se chiama [...]». Text published and commented by Bonfil 1996, p. 429.

²⁹ See on this Caffiero 2019; Michelson 2022.

³⁰ Perani, Rivlin 2000; Signorello 2020, p. 45; Jesurum 2020.

³¹ Horowitz 1989.

1669), which remained under the d'Este jurisdiction, more than twenty companies were active, including one that, in its Italian name, was called *Atti di amorevole benevolenza e misericordia* and, from 1735, the women's association *Beneficio degli ammalati*, which assisted the impoverished.

The purposes of these aggregative realities could also be recreational, the printing and popular dissemination of sacred texts, or mystical, literary and musical; they could give themselves the goal of organising theatrical performances, songs and concerts and thus produce interesting cultural contaminations. For instance, in the late seventeenth century, a company approached the Christian composer Carlo Grossi to commission music for poetry written in Hebrew. Similarly, in 18th century Ferrara, Jews gathered in companies to ponder (and perhaps stage) dramas such as *Tofte 'aruk*, which, tracing Dante, narrated a journey into the afterlife³².

One Midnight Company (*Compagnia della Mezzanotte*), which was active in the 17th century and then reopened in the following century, operated in Jewish Lugo. Lugo, a small town situated in a central position between the three Legations of Bologna, Ferrara and Romagna, had become the main emporium of the three territories and the richest city in the Ravenna area. The town's biennial fair, which attracted merchants and traders from across the Papal States, was second only to the renowned fair in Senigallia. In the 1750s, a poem was printed in Hebrew for the purpose of the Company's refounding. This text is a compelling illustration of a cultural and political "manifesto", which merits careful consideration in its entirety.

The companions [... decided] to gather together and constitute again the offering of the Midnight Company, which in former times had been founded on pillars and just columns in the Holy Community of Lugo, by great and quality people [...]. Now they gathered in the best way, in this Brotherhood on the first day of *Kislew* in the year 5514 [November 27, 1753]: both men and boys, according to the ways and regulations and conditions which they decisively established among themselves, and all together decided and pledged themselves also on behalf of their descendants, without, however, making it a bond, to observe the maxims of the Fathers and to continue the customs of the elders by putting them into practice. They have, therefore, resolved to commemorate this every year on the evening of the Sabbath outing closest to the aforementioned *capomese* [the first day of the new month] and to honor the Lord with lights and lightning. [...] Therefore, I, the youngest of the group, rejoice with them with great joy, also contributing for my part with some poems and songs, the fruit of the ingenuity granted me by the terrible God.³³

The remainder of "Midnight" serves to establish a closer bond between the Lugo fraternity and the companies of "morning watchers". These indi-

³² Lattes, Perani 2010-2011, p. 443; on the Este confraternities see Al Kalak, Pavan 2013, p. 5.

³³ Lattes, Perani 2010-2011, p. 446.

viduals, inhabiting various peninsular communities, were known to congregate during nocturnal hours or shortly before daybreak. This coincided with the time when, in Lugo as elsewhere, access to ghetto gates was restricted. These gatherings were characterised by recitations of the mystical formulary known as the “midnight prayer”, as well as reflections on the destruction of the Temple and calls for the restoration of Israel. The practice of “awakening the sleepy ones” (and the decline of overtly mystical formulas, as evidenced by the *Zohar* - more prevalent in the public outings of seventeenth-century Jewish associations) may offer insight into the initial outcomes of eighteenth-century cultural change. The phenomenon was also absorbed by Italian Jews, and its most structured form was found in contemporary Berlin during the period of the *Haskalah* movement, which is also known as the Jewish Enlightenment³⁴.

These fraternal societies employed a variety of media, including posters and flying sheets, to disseminate their messages within the ghetto. These visual communications, characterised by their use of text, emblems, and “feats”, can be regarded as a form of symbols that aligns with the Renaissance tradition, as exemplified by Andrea Alciato’s *Emblemata* (1531). This tradition combines images and text in a manner that often defies immediate interpretation, serving to express the intimate nature of an individual or the mission and identity of a group. As demonstrated in the printed version of the Lughese company’s “manifesto”, a clue to this effect also appears above the text in the form of an emblem. This consists of a winged angel sounding a trumpet, announcing like a herald the refounding of the assembly³⁵.

Poems posted in the Jewish seraglio at weddings, graduations, synagogue inaugurations or other public moments feature themes that demonstrate, among other things, the favor enjoyed among peninsular Jews by classical mythology and medieval epics. The texts could be written by influential rabbis and literati, who combined verse and prose or melodies for instruments and choirs. The celebrated Mantuan rabbi Moses ben Mordekai Zacuto (born in Amsterdam in 1625-1697), for example, composed hundreds of them. Most of his rhymes were distributed in this way, nor were they ever included in the printed works of this celebrated rabbi, which are predominantly Talmudic or Kabbalistic in theme.

The printers of these pamphlets or posters could be Jewish³⁶; however, more often than not, they were Christian, a situation that was partly due to the difficult events that had characterised Jewish printing in the Renaissance. The visual component of these printed materials, often adorned with frames

³⁴ An invitation to broaden *the scope of the Haskalah* beyond the usual geographical and intellectual partitions is in Shear 2012, p. 254.

³⁵ Lattes, Perani 2010-2011, pp. 339-340.

³⁶ See for example Bregman 2015.

and preformed images, incorporated both traditional Jewish letters and decorative elements, as well as Christian and classical motifs. The recurrence of these motifs, as evidenced by their pervasiveness, did not cause any discontent among Jewish patrons.

Furthermore, since the Middle Ages and subsequently during the Renaissance, Jewish poets who occupied a liminal space between the peninsular poetic language, local vernaculars and the Hebrew of ancient biblical poetry came to the fore. There are records of Jews reading a variety of vernacular literature, ranging from poems to romances of chivalry, in editions produced and illustrated by Christian printers. A notable example of interconfessional literary exchange can be found in the Ferrarese poetic *tenzone* of the first half of the 15th century, which reports the literary colloquy between a “Jewish Solomon” – presumably the banker Salomone Norsa – and the man of letters Giovanni di Pellegrino, Lionello d’Este’s amanuensis. In this exchange, the former is lauded by the latter for his “mature, grave, lofty and lordly” style, with Solomon reciprocating by praising “illustrious Ferrarese” for “the [...] beautiful sentiment” expressed: thus displaying a commendable degree of humanistic erudition and cultural sophistication³⁷.

Visual elements, in addition to textual content, contribute to the redefining of a scenario in which physical boundaries between Jews and non-Jews give way to the intermingling of symbols and cultures. However, it should be noted that not all forms of dramaturgy enacted within the confines of the Jewish enclosure can be interpreted through a collaborative lens. One may consider, for instance, the already mentioned, resilient visual Roman tradition of the *giudiate*, which encompassed popular spectacularisations that continued until as late as the nineteenth century. During Carnival, the guild of fishmongers, based in the Oratory of Sant’Andrea in Pescheria – situated near the Portico d’Ottavia, just outside the boundaries of the ghetto – mocked Jewish rites and beliefs on ox-drawn carts. Roman Jews denounced such spectacles to church authorities on several occasions during the modern age³⁸.

This objection was articulated to the Pope, for instance, in the following terms in January 1710:

The *fattori* [administrators] of the University of the Jews reverently expose to your Holiness the fact that on the occasion of Carnival other times fishmongers have attempted to bring a coffin to Rome with various animal heads, pretending to pay their respects to dead Jewish rabbis by means of pranks and improper acts to be used with the dead, from which great inconveniences and scandals have always ensued, so that the poor Jews have had to remain closed in the ghetto for many days, or even expose themselves to jokes, and to be injured by the people [... The] endless taunts and jokes that they receive for this

³⁷ Quoted by Busi 2018, p. 34.

³⁸ Grazzini 2022.

cause [...] in addition to the indecency of making mockery and ridicule of dead bodies, still brings universal scandal, even to learned Christians, to hear improperly with intolerable contempt the name of God mentioned³⁹.

However, not all manifestations of theatricalization of contact between Christians and Jews were characterised by these derogatory displays. In the Mantua of the Gonzagas, for example, spanning the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Jews were compelled to perform as tribute to the dukes, but they were granted autonomy in shaping the theatrical manifestation that unfolded before a religiously diverse audience. The financial obligations associated with these performances were shouldered by the Jewish Community⁴⁰.

5. *To conclude*

In his seminal work, David Ruderman explores the five key characteristics that unite early modern Jewish communities across Europe, the Mediterranean and the Near East: mobility (leading to increased contact between Jews of different backgrounds, traditions and languages, as well as between Jews and non-Jews); a heightened sense of communal cohesion throughout all Jewish settlements, with the growing influence of lay oligarchies; a surge in knowledge brought about by the printing press (accompanied by interest in Jewish literature among Christian readers, an expanded curriculum of Jewish studies, and Jewish elites entering universities); the crisis of rabbinic authority expressed through active messianism, mystical prophecy, radical enthusiasm and heresy; and, finally, the blurring of religious identities impacting groups such as individual converts to Christianity⁴¹.

A specific examination of the spatial and visual aspects of Jewish segregation in early modern Italy may enrich this framework, while elucidating the manner in which said segregation facilitated – if only in a reactionary sense – the autonomous flourishing of Jewish cultural representations. The existence of connections with external phenomena was not hindered, and the contiguous, everyday spatiality between Jews and non-Jews helped to transform the most receptive among them into vital mediators and recreators, placed at the crossroads between different social and intellectual spheres. This seems to be

³⁹ Signorello 2020, p. 54.

⁴⁰ Jaffe-Berg 2013.

⁴¹ Ruderman 2011, p. 62: «Despite the explicit aim of the architects of the ghetto to insulate Christian culture from the alleged pollution of its Jewish minority, the closure paradoxically opened up new opportunities for cultural dialogue and interaction with the Christian majority as Jews saw themselves a more organic and natural part of their environment».

in line with the recent revaluations of the early modern period as a distinctive era in Jewish history. In contrast with the relatively disconnected Jewish culture areas of the Middle Ages, the cohesive diasporic society of the early modern period saw Jews becoming part of a distinctive yet internally diverse civilisation. While it is acknowledged that their story was shaped by key centripetal and centrifugal forces closely linked to broader early modern phenomena, such as mercantilism, international geopolitics, and the growth of book culture, recent bibliography increasingly emphasises that Jews experienced their own unique early modern period, rather than merely reacting to external developments⁴².

The triangulations between legislative and judicial powers, religious offices, collectivities and individualities, and cultural expressions inside and outside the Jewish settlement that have been traced demonstrate a vitality, a variety and a variability of balances. This finding is at odds with any stereotypical characterisation of the “Jew” and also with the insidious timelessness in which Jewish history is condemned if viewed exclusively through the lens of, albeit subsisting, discrimination.

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⁴² Graizbord 2025.

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