

14. A BRIEF HISTORY OF ITALIAN JEWS



Jewish communities in Italy today

There are approximately 25,000 Jews in Italy today, registered in the country's 21 Jewish communities. The Jewish communities throughout Italy are collectively represented at national and international level by the Union of Italian Jewish Communities (UCEI), pursuant to Law 101/89 ("Rules governing relations between the State and the Union of Italian Jewish Communities") and subsequent amendments, and the "Agreement between the Italian Republic and the Union of Italian Jewish Communities" of 27 February 1987. The communities serve as a reference point for their members to whom they provide religious services, Jewish education and social support services. To this end, some communities have their own institutions, such as officially recognised schools, religious education centres for children, retirement homes, cultural and social centres. Each community is governed by an elected council, which appoints a president, who serves for four years, and a chief rabbi, who heads all religious educational activities.

The age of Roman paganism (2nd century BC - 313 AD)

The Jewish diaspora migrated to Rome after crossing other Mediterranean countries (Egypt, Syria, Cyrenaica and Greece). The first official contacts between Judaea and Rome were established on the initiative of Judas Maccabaeus of the Hasmonean family, who sparked the revolt against the Seleucid Empire in 168 BC. Subsequently, in the years 168-139 BC, many emissaries left Jerusalem for Rome, bringing with them merchants, craftsmen, scholars and travellers. They were joined, after 63 BC, by prisoners of war captured by the Roman general Pompey during the military campaign that culminated in the conquest of Jerusalem. Mirroring events in their homeland of Judea, the status of the Jews on the peninsula changed when the Roman legions under Titus razed Jerusalem to the ground in 70 AD, including the Second Temple. Tens of thousands of Jewish captives were taken to Rome as slaves.

Diocletian gradually revoked the special privileges granted to the Jewish community by Julius Caesar. Nevertheless, the Jews living in the Italic peninsula were recognised as citizens of the Empire. They were one of the many groups that made up the Italic reality of the time. The Jews lived in a territory undergoing a process of Christian inculturation, which was then in its early stages. Finally, while polytheistic and pagan Rome tolerated all faiths, monotheistic and Christian Rome, after Constantine's Edict of 313, did not want any competition. The emperor forbade conversion to Judaism and mixed marriages. In 313, the Jews were thus distributed mostly in Rome and the south of the peninsula. By the time of the Edict of Thessalonica (380), which made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, the Jewish presence in Italy had been a reality for several centuries.

The Barbarian invasions

The Barbarian invasions of the Visigoths, Vandals and Huns brought suffering to both the Jewish and non-Jewish populations. It was not until the conquest of Italy by the Goths that some semblance of order was restored to the country, whose king, Theodoric (489-526), managed to maintain a certain balance between his victorious minority and the defeated Italic minority. These were also decades of relative tranquillity for the Jews, as Theodoric restored to them the privileges they had enjoyed under Roman law. After his death, the Italic territory returned to be a battlefield. In the year 600, the Jews fled the Frankish-Lombard kingdom in the north, where the rigid unitary structures did not favour the integration of its various components, and moved towards the realms of power in the south, where the plethora of principalities, duchies and free cities provided a safer environment for the formation of Jewish communities. The south of Italy borders the Mediterranean, and there were frequent exchanges with the coastal countries, both commercial and cultural. A flourishing Jewish presence developed there over the course of four centuries. The Muslim-Arab rule on the island of Sicily was very liberal for the time, and the only restrictive measure imposed on the Jews was a yellow mark on their garments. Under the Norman dominion, the Jews were allowed to lead a relatively normal life and integrate themselves socially and culturally into the environment in which they lived. Wherever Norman rule extended, Jews were allowed to have their own schools, synagogues and craft workshops. Their art of weaving and painting textiles and silk was exported abroad. The Hebrew language facilitated communication with co-religionists from other countries and thus maritime trade. The entrepreneurial spirit of the Jews was the driving force behind the economic development of the Norman dominions. On this subject, historian G. Todeschini writes: "Writing the history of Jews in medieval Italy means writing a part of Italian history. And precisely because the medieval history of the territories that make up the Italic Peninsula constitutes the foundation of modern Italy, referring to the Jews in Italy as a structural component of Italian history means challenging the widely held assumption that this history is culturally and religiously homogeneous, and thus the very idea of Italy as a unified, unchanging, Latin and Christian reality."93

⁹³ "Fare la storia degli ebrei presenti nell'Italia del Medioevo significa scrivere un pezzo di storia italiana. D'altra parte, proprio perché la storia medievale dei territori che formavano la penisola italica è il punto di partenza della futura complessi- tà italiana, parlare degli ebrei in Italia come di una componente strutturale della storia italiana significa rimettere in discussione l'idea molto diffusa dell'omogeneità cultura- le e religiosa di questa storia, rimettere in gioco, dunque, l'immagine di un'Italia come realtà compattamente latina e cristiana da sempre." G. Todeschini, *Gli ebrei nell'Italia medievale*, Carocci, 2018, p. 11.

AN INTRODUCTION TO JUDAISM IN **16** CHAPTERS

From the barbarian invasions to the Empire

In the space of just a few years, Pope Gregory the Great (590-604) re-established the authority of the Church in the whole of the western Roman-Barbarian world. His authority extended to the Jews: he defended them against the violence of the clergy and upheld their freedom of worship.⁹⁴

At the beginning of the 7th century, the Italian peninsula was divided into two parts: the Lombards in the north and the Byzantines in the centre and south. The latter controlled Apulia, Calabria, Sicily and Sardinia. They also extended their influence to the exarchates of Ravenna, Venice, Rome and Naples. Between these two powers stood the Papacy. This division of the peninsula was reflected in the history of the Jews, who from then on became more and more anchored to the territory and to the local areas. Rome's Jewish presence, which had served as a point of attraction, remained significant, although it was during these years that the first migrations of Jews to the south began. In the same years, Apulian Judaism was born and was to produce many men of letters and scholars. The saying "the law comes from Bari and the word of God from Otranto", which is said to have been popular in 12th century France, testifies to the importance of this area and of southern Italy in general in the early Middle Ages. The Hebrew language underwent a veritable revival: some fine Hebrew poetry was written in Apulia between the 9th and 12th centuries. Hebrew literature spread from Apulia to Germany and France, partly as a result of the aforementioned migrations.⁹⁵ In addition, numerous Talmudic academies were established in the cities of Venosa, Oria, Bari and Otranto.

The Age of Expansion: 1100-1300

From 1100 to 1200 the Church concentrated her efforts on preserving her supremacy over the great European powers and combating the heresies that had begun to spread. It is in the light of this latter objective that a number of subsequent measures should be read. These are: the 'bull' of Callixtus II (1119-1124), *Constitutio pro Judaeis* (1120), which forbade the construction of new synagogues or the embellishment of existing ones and forbade the Jews to have Christian servants or nursemaids; the decisions of the Third Lateran Council (1179), which confirmed the bull of 1120; and finally the provisions of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), which, under the authority of Innocent III, reinforced what had already been established and imposed on the Jews the need to distinguish themselves from the Christians. A round cloth to be worn on their garments and a hat of a certain shape were the most common marks. In the south, however, Frederick II, Duke of Swabia, excommunicated several times, promulgated the *Liber Augustalis* in Melfi in 1231, a new legal code granting Jews the same treatment as other citizens This was a challenge to the papacy. In 1267, Pope

⁹⁴ E. Savino, *Gli ebrei in Italia meridionale nell'epistolario di Gregorio Magno in "Sefer Yuḥasin"* 7, pp. 15-33.

A. Milano, *Storia degli ebrei di Italia*, Einaudi, 1963, pp. 60- 66. G. TAMANI, *La letteratura ebraica medievale (secoli X-XVIII)*, Morcelliana, 2004, pp. 155-185.

Clement IV, in his bull *Turbato corde*, called on the Dominicans and Franciscans to adopt a more severe attitude towards the Jews. Manfred's death marked the end of the Norman saga. The Inquisition was established in southern Italy in 1268: it marked the beginning of a long series of attempts to convert the Jews.

Towards the age of the ghetto: 1300 to 1500

A broader approach should be reserved for the question of usury. The binomial "Jew-usurer" was to become one of the most entrenched anti-Semitic stereotypes. The issue of interest-bearing loans was central to the Jewish presence in the Christian world. Usury was first defined in 806 as any monetary transaction in which "more is asked than is given."

It should be noted, however, that the Jews were certainly not the only ones to practise usury. In fact, they were the only ones to do so openly and with the protection of the civil authorities. It is important to understand that the meaning of the term has changed over time. Today, a distinction is made between usury and other legitimate forms of financial and banking activity, which was not the case then. Any activity in this sector was considered usurious. In fact, the excessive strictness of the canonical laws meant that, unlike Jewish usury, usury practised by Christians was a clandestine and shameful form of trade. Under their Law, Jews could not lend money to their co-religionists, while lending at interest to non-Jews was permitted. The Church, for its part, considered the activity of lending impure, but with the 4th Lateran Council, by forbidding Jews to lend money at unreasonable rates, it in fact permitted them to lend money at an ordinary interest rate.

This period also saw the emergence of two other phenomena that came to characterise relations between the Jewish minority and the Christian majority for a long time to come. These were: forced conversionary sermons and expulsions. Forced conversion sermons, which Jews had to undergo periodically with the purpose of their conversion to the truth of Christianity, began in several places starting in the 12th century and became a permanent institution in the age of the Counter-Reformation (in the Papal States this custom continued until 1846). Faced with conversion to Catholicism or expulsion, in 1290 the entire Jewish population of England was expelled from the country. They were expelled from French territories four times between 1182 and 1322, and finally in 1394 (from Provence only in 1508). Expulsions from Spain and Sicily (1492), Portugal (1496-97) and throughout southern Italy (1510-1541) were particularly dramatic.

The widespread revival of the unfounded accusation of poisoning wells and springs, which had already been made against the Jews (and lepers) in the past, was a common practice in that period. Although Pope Clement VI issued two bulls in 1348 declaring these accusations to be groundless, the belief in the existence of a Jewish conspiracy against Christianity continued to spread. It was a time of great migratory movements. The sequence of violence and persecution against the Jews explains why, from the late Middle Ages, a growing number of Jews fled to Eastern Europe. Many left Italy to seek temporary refuge on the other side of the Alps. For the same

reasons, other groups of Jews took the opposite route.

It is estimated that a total of 100,000 Jews were slaughtered by the Crusaders on their way through the towns of the German Rhineland. By the early 14th century, about 40,000 Jews lived in the Italian peninsula out of a population of 8 million. Northern Italy remained relatively unaffected by that wave of insanity, and over time it became a safe haven for thousands of Jews who settled in what are now the regions of Lombardy, Trentino, Piedmont, Veneto and Emilia. In these areas they had to pay a "residence fee", wear a distinctive badge and endure other restrictions, but they were also able to flourish and distinguish themselves through their cultural achievements. Before discussing the period of the ghettos, it is worth mentioning the relations between Jews and Christians during the Renaissance, and particularly in the Florence of Cosimo (1389-1464) and Lorenzo de' Medici (1449-1492)⁹⁶. Suffice it to mention the importance attached to Jewish culture by an intellectual of the calibre of Marsilio Ficino (1433 - 1499), who contributed to the spread of the idea of a universal theology (prisca theologia), as evidenced in his book De Christiana religione. Moreover, Ficino's relationship with the Jewish tradition did not develop into a passionate study of the Jewish Kabbalah, as was later the case with the more famous Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494). Rather, it can be seen as a scholarly interest that sought to confirm the importance of Platonism for the Jewish tradition. However, his search for new sources of human wisdom brought Ficino into contact with Jewish intellectuals such as Flavius Mithridates (c. 1445-c. 1489) and Yochanan Alemanno (c. 1435-c. 1504), who introduced him to the foundations of the Jewish mystical tradition. Although he can hardly be considered an exponent of the Christian Kabbalah, Ficino was the first to introduce the term Kabbalah (sic) in the Italian tongue in Florence between the years 1479 and 1480. His theological and philosophical reflections undoubtedly contributed to the spread of the Jewish tradition in European culture for centuries to come. Whilst Ficino, as we have seen, was primarily involved in the rediscovery of Plato and Plotinus, other scholars, such as Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463 -1494), Johannes Reuchlin (1455 - 1522) and Francesco Zorzi (1466 - 1540), took a closer interest in Jewish culture, especially the Kabbalah. All three were credited with founding the Christian Kabbalah. But it was Giovanni Pico della Mirandola who marked the most significant encounter between Christian and Jewish culture in Renaissance Florence. Pico had three Jewish mentors: Elia del Medigo (1458 - 1493) and the aforementioned Flavius Mithridates and Yochanan Alemanno. It was probably in Florence that Pico first became acquainted with the Jewish convert William Raymond Moncada, alias Flavius Mithridates, alias Shemu'el Nissim Abulfarag, who was to initiate him into the Jewish Kabbalah. Having discovered the Jewish Kabbalah, Pico commissioned Flavius Mithridates (c. 1444 - c. 1489) to translate many Kabbalistic works from Hebrew into Latin.97

⁹⁶ Il Rinascimento parla ebraico, a cura di G. Busi e S. Greco, Silvana Editoriale, Milano 2019, 218.

⁹⁷ See the following studies on these figures, which also contain an extensive bibliography: Francesco Zorzi, *L'armonia del mondo*, a cura di S. Campanini, series. "Il Pensiero Occidentale", Bompiani, Milano 2010. G. BUSI, R. EBGI, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. Mito, magia, Qabbalah*, Einaudi, Torino 2014. G. BARTOLUCCI, *Vera religio. Marsilio Ficino e la tradizione ebraica*, Paideia, Torino 2017.

The Age of the Ghetto

By the middle of the 15th century, the Italian territory was divided into many small states, with the Papal States forming a separate realm. The Duchy of Savoy, with Turin as its capital, had three other feudal principalities within its borders: Saluzzo, Asti and Monferrato. All three saw a progressive influx of Jews, forming many other communities. Ashkenazi, Sephardic and Levantine Jews settled in Venice, creating a cosmopolitan Jewish community that were to play an important role in the development of the Republic. Other centres rich in Jewish history and culture are Mantua, Modena and Ferrara. In Florence, under its Signoria, Jewish life flourished, especially in the banking sector. However, even in Italy this favourable climate was to be short-lived: as mentioned above, with the expulsion from Spain in 1492, the Jews were expelled from the Spanish territories of Sardinia and Sicily, and subsequently, with the Spaniards' rule of the Kingdom of Naples, the Jews were gradually expelled from this region between 1510 and 1541. By 1492, at least 200,000 Jews had been expelled from Spain and 40,000 from Sicily, ending a presence that had lasted fifteen centuries. Meanwhile, in 1516, the Republic of Venice created the world's first ghetto: an urban area surrounded by high walls with gates that shut in the evening, where Jews were compelled to live. The situation worsened with a series of anti-Jewish papal bulls at the beginning of the Counter-Reformation. The first bull, Cum nimis absurdum, was issued by Pope Paul IV in 1555. It established the Ghetto within the Papal State and urged Catholic authorities to adopt similar segregationist measures. From then on, apart from opening pawnshops, the only business permitted to Jews was the sale of second-hand clothes and worn-out articles (strazzaria). More restrictive measures followed, culminating in Pius IV's bull of 1569, providing for the expulsion of the Jews from all papal territories except the Ghetto of Rome and Ancona. The Ghettos were gradually extended to other areas until the French Revolution followed by the Revolutions of 1848 - effectively abolished them (the last remaining Ghetto was in Rome, abolished not until 1870 after the Porta Pia breach). With the introduction of the principles of liberté, égalité, fraternité of the French Revolution, Italian Jews, who numbered about 30,000 out of a population of 17 million at the time, gained a foothold in the public life of the country. The French military occupation of the Papal States resulted in the declaration of a Republic in Rome, ruled by liberal Italian patriots. The publication of a Roman constitution in March 1798, based on the French constitution, granted equal treatment by the State to all citizens and faiths. The Jews enthusiastically welcomed the arrival of the French troops in Italy, but they remained cautious, as if foreseeing the Restoration that followed the Revolution and Napoleon, and with it the restoration of most of the previous restrictions.

From the Enlightenment to emancipation

Between 1650 and 1815, Jews were allowed to settle in the Kingdom of Savoy (with the exception of Sardinia), the Republic of Venice, the Duchy of Mantua, the Duchy of Parma (outside the capital), the Duchy of Modena, the Grand Duchy of Tuscany

and in certain areas of the Papal States. There were no Jewish settlements in the Kingdom of Naples, apart from an unsuccessful attempt between 1740 and 1747. Only a few wealthy Jewish merchants were tolerated in Genoa. Each state applied different policies to its local Jewish community. The living conditions, legal status and opportunities of Jews living in Tuscany were therefore very different from those of Jews living in Piedmont or Rome during the same period. Nor, as in the past, did the Jews of early modern Italy share a unified, homogeneous culture. Because of a long history of migration stemming from the country's strategic position on the Mediterranean, Italian Jews maintained close ties with a much wider Jewish world than the relative small Italian context might suggest.

In the 16th century, Jews from the Ottoman Empire and Eastern Europe, as well as *conversos* from the Iberian Peninsula, began to settle in Italy alongside local communities dating back to the early Middle Ages. By 1650, Italy was home to a number of Jewish traditions, including those of the Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews, in addition to the Italian Jews. Those Jews spoke, read and wrote a variety of languages, including Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, German, French, Yiddish and, of course, Hebrew. They lived in close proximity to each other. They practised different customs and rituals and had different educational systems and social aspirations. By 1650, all Italian Jewish communities had developed oligarchic systems of self-governance, solidly controlled by families of merchants and bankers. Most communities retained autonomous jurisdiction over Jewish civil disputes, with the exception of Rome, Ancona and Venice.

The Church's attitude towards the Jews remained repressive throughout the 18th century. Several attempts at conversion were made by Pope Benedict XIV (1740-58) and Pope Pius VI (1775-99). By 1797, *Houses of Catechumens* had been established in various areas. Pope Pius VI, who continued the policy of conversion established by his predecessors, directly confronted what he saw as the threat posed by the rising forces of secularism and Enlightenment culture, and in 1775 issued an anti-Jewish edict on the Jews of Rome (*'Editto sopra gli ebrei'*). It forbade, inter alia, the study of the *Talmud* and any relation between Jews and Christians, and required Jews to wear a distinctive sign even in the Ghetto.

From the Restoration to the Second World War

With the Restoration and the widespread re-institution of the Ghettos, the situation of the Jews had largely returned to that of the 'ancien regime'. It was especially with the revolutions of 1848, to which Jews contributed significantly, that the issue of the Jews' emancipation returned to the fore. The only exception was the city of Leghorn, where the Grand Duke of Tuscany encouraged the influx of Jews and guaranteed their safety with a decree known as the "Livornina". Ghettos were also re-established in Piedmont, but the Jewish economic expansion during the years of freedom had created enduring circumstances that were difficult to undo. In Lombardy-Venetia there were 7,000 Jews who were allowed to attend university and pursue their studies. The situation was similar in Tuscany, Parma, Modena and Mantua. In the latter

city, Jews were allowed to go out of the Ghetto during the day and even to have "granaries and storerooms there, provided they kept the necessary distance from the churches."

Starting in the mid-19th century, the history of Italian Jews became increasingly intertwined with that of Italy, and it is not surprising that the Jews took part in the Risorgimento uprisings. Italian patriots such as Mazzini and Cattaneo advocated the overthrow of a closed, reactionary, anti-Semitic world. Two hundred Jews took part in Garibaldi's campaigns of 1848 and 1849, and when Camillo Benso, Count of Cavour, was entrusted with governmental responsibilities, he surrounded himself with Jewish advisers and friends. Suffice it to mention that his private secretary was Jewish Italian diplomat and politician Isaac Artom (1829-1900).

The fall of Rome in 1870 marked the end of the last Jewish ghetto in Europe.

In 1871 there were eleven Jews in the Chamber of Deputies. Ernesto Nathan (1845-1921), mayor of Rome from 1907 to 1913, was Jewish. The Jews of Trieste played an important role in the irredentist movement and in Italian culture, the symbol of which was Italo Svevo from Trieste. A large number of Italian Jewish soldiers fought in the First World War of 1914-1918 (Italy entered the war in 1915). In 1922, the Fascists came to power and the attitude of the Jews was no different from that of other Italians: some were for it, some were against it, some were resigned to it. In 1938, however, a violent anti-Semitic campaign began. The first anti-Jewish laws, passed on 2 and 3 September 1938, banned all foreign Jews from living in Italy and deprived Jews who had arrived after 1918 of their citizenship. Jews were banned from working and studying in Italian public and private schools, and the measure applied to all levels of education. The second, harsher decree, issued on 17 November 1938, excluded Jews from military service and public office and restricted their activities in real estate, private business and the professions. Trade and craft licences were subsequently withdrawn, and the liberal professions - lawyers, engineers, architects and doctors - were prohibited. A certain number of Italian Jews (perhaps 4/5,000 people) emigrated, but many chose to remain. The Catholic Church protested against the non-recognition of conversions and the prohibition of mixed marriages, even if the Jewish spouse had embraced Catholicism.

Italy entered the war on the German side on 10 June 1940, but its disastrous fate was such that it finally surrendered in September 1943. Germany reacted to the news that Italy had surrendered by occupying the entire peninsula. In the early hours of 16 October, the Germans surrounded the Ghetto of Rome, broke into private homes and rounded up the Jews - men, women and children. They were forced out of their homes, loaded onto trucks and, after a few days, deported in sealed wagons to Fossoli and from there to Auschwitz, where most of them were killed immediately. In the weeks and months that followed, the roundups continued throughout Rome. A total of 2091 Jews were deported from Rome. The Germans deported more than 8500 Jews from all over Italy (including the Aegean islands) between 1943 and 1945. Only a few hundred returned. Of the 200,000 Italians who actively resisted the invaders, 2000 were Jews. Of the 70,000 Italian partisans killed in action, 700 were Jews. Rome was liberated on 4 June 1944 and Italy on 25 April 1945.

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Reconstruction

From that moment on, Italian Jewry, like the rest of the country, began to rebuild. The Italian Jews thus started to count how many of them were left. A decade after the end of the war, there were approximately 30.000 Jews in Italy, the largest centres being Rome with about 11.000 and Milan with 6.000. The few remaining Jews were left with the task of rebuilding Italian Judaism after the catastrophe.

Decrees passed by the Italian government on 20 January 1944 restored full civil and political rights to Jews. On 10 August they were readmitted to public office, and on 5 October their property rights were recognised.

A UN Resolution of November 1947 called for the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine, and on 14 May 1948 the State of Israel was born. But immediately after its creation, the State of Israel was attacked by the armies of five Arab countries.

Nevertheless, many Jewish refugees arrived in Palestine via Italy, which immediately recognised the existence of Israel. With some help from abroad, Italian Jewry rebuilt its structures: synagogues and schools resumed their activities, also thanks to the contribution of some prominent personalities such as Dante Lattes (1876-1965) and Elio Toaff (1915-2015).

The Jews and the Catholic Church

Pope John XXIII initiated a radical change in the Church's long history of anti-Judaism after his meeting with Jewish-French historian Jules Isaac in 1960. In preparation for that change, John XXIII took a series of steps such as the drafting of the document *De Judaeis*, culminating in the Second Vatican Council's declaration *Nostra Aetate*. Since then, the Catholic Church has changed its attitude towards Judaism and the Jews with the promulgation of numerous other documents, including many important meetings and landmark visits that have contributed to the development of a new and fraternal relationship. Another historic event was the visit of John Paul II to the Great Synagogue of Rome on 1 April 1986, where he was received by Chief Rabbi Elio Toaff, marking the first visit by a Pope to a synagogue. John Paul II went on to visit the Western Wall (*Kotel*) and the Holocaust Museum (*Yad Vashem*) in Jerusalem (2000). Visits to the Temple in Rome and pilgrimages to Jerusalem were again made by Benedict XVI (2009 and 2010) and Pope Francis (2014 and 2016)⁹⁸.

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⁹⁸ Concerning Jewish-Christian dialogue, see the educational toolkit https://www.pars-edu.it/ percorsi-forma- tive/Jewish-Christian-dialogue (website visited on 23.06.2020).

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