

Il Ghetto

FORGING ITALIAN
JEWISH IDENTITIES
1516 - 1870



Photo by Alberto Jona Falco, Milan, Italy

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MUSEO ITALOAMERICANO
SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA



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“Italian Jews! Two great names, two enviable glories, two splendid crowns are joined together in you. . . . Who among you, in human and divine glories, does not reverently bow before the prodigious names of Moses and Dante?” — *Rabbi Elia Benamozegh*, 1847

A FOREWORD by David M. Rosenberg-Wohl, Curator

Italy continues to capture our imagination. For some, it is the land of our family’s culture. Others of us embrace the food, the language, the art, the civilization. We travel to Rome and see the dome of St. Peter’s, beacon of the Catholic faith. We surround ourselves with the glories of Renaissance art and architecture in Florence and Siena. We lose ourselves in the magical canals, passageways and pigeons of that city of islands, Venice.

For those of us who are Jewish or interested in the relationship of Judaism and Christianity, Italy is a land of particular fascination. Jews lived here long before there were Christians, at least by the second century B.C.E. It is in Italy that the Catholic Church first set down the rules restricting Jewish activity and Christian interaction with Jews— rules observed by church and state alike that continued in one form or another into the modern era of Italian unification.

The notion of the ghetto arises out of this complex history and interaction. Many of us know the word only in its contemporary urban context. Or we associate ghettos with Nazi segregation and extermination of Jews in Europe as a whole. But the ghetto has its roots in 16th century Italy— an isolated, locked enclosure for the Jews of Venice.

How do we respond to the notion that, in this country of Western culture and in the years following the Renaissance, cities of Italy increasingly confined their Jewish population and restricted their activities? What does the ghetto mean? What effect did it have? How can we understand this period of history on its own terms, separate from our own time and yet profoundly affecting it?



The ghetto was restrictive, but it was also progressive. It was designed to separate Jews from Christians and yet that was not the result. Some believed the ghetto would encourage Jews to convert, and yet Jewish culture thrived. Most important, this symbol of separation of one part of society from another failed.

Italian culture— a culture influenced by Jewish, Islamic and Christian cultures, flourished.

It is this lesson that the Age of the Ghetto teaches us today. Where many, particularly in Europe, see a “Western” culture under threat from the “East,” Italy demonstrates that culture is not a “zero-sum” game in which the gain of one is the loss of the other.

A FOREWORD continues on p2

OPPOSITE PAGE LEFT: **Ancient Ruins of Synagogue at Ostia**, Photo: Mary Steiner. THIS PAGE: **Hanukkah Lamp**, Italy or North Africa, n.d.; Bronze. Loan from Judah L. Magnes Museum Purchase, Strauss Collection. This Hanukkah Lamp is possibly North African with many Italian motifs, such as the crenellations on top and the fan-shaped grillwork. The tower rising out of the back, as well as the smaller towers surmounting each arm, evoke the architecture of late medieval Italian palazzi.

Culture is—and always has been—a collaborative effort. Culture knows no walls.

The task of demonstrating this view of Italian culture has presented varied challenges. The material evidence of a thriving Jewish culture is best demonstrated by artifacts themselves, and in this respect the Museo ItaloAmericano has carefully assembled a collection of items from the 16th through 19th centuries which form the tangible core of the exhibit. In particular, the Museo is endlessly grateful to the Judah L. Magnes Museum, just across



Spice Box, 18th century, Italy; Silver. Loan from Judah L. Magnes Museum Purchase

the Bay, in Berkeley. The Magnes has graciously loaned the Museo important pieces from its extensive collection of Italian Judaica, including silver and brass objects utilized for worship in the synagogue and the home. Ceramics illustrative of Jewish Italian life have been loaned by The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. A rare musical score composed by an Italian Jew appears courtesy of the Music Library of the University of California, Berkeley. An anonymous private collection has provided a first edition of a philosophical text by the leading Jewish Rabbi of Venice.

And yet, the story of cultural interaction cannot be presented adequately by artifact alone. We have received permission to display certain rare photographs of the Age of the Ghetto taken in the 1930s by Hungarian photographer Ernő Munkácsi, and we have consulted with the pre-eminent photographer of Jewish Italy today, Alberto Jona Falco, to select certain of his vibrant images of Jewish art and architecture. Most important, we have identified and presented images from over thirty national and international museums and libraries, including Museo di Roma, Museo Ebraico di Roma, Museo Correr and Galleria dell'Accademia, Venice and Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

All of these artifacts and images are arranged in a way to emphasize the satisfying yet challenging complexity of Jewish-Christian cultural interaction in Italy from the 16th through 19th centuries. The exhibit focuses upon the longstanding importance of Jews as traders on the Italian peninsula, and explores how this lens allows us to appreciate the depth of Jewish life in three different parts of Italy (Venice, north-central cities such as Florence, and Rome). While we explore the degree to which the ghetto kept Jewish merchants and Christians apart in the context of Venice, ghetto walls form more of a backdrop once we depart that city. In Livorno, Mantova, Padova and Ferrara we consider the relatively free movement of trade, musicians and doctors. Rome concludes the exhibit with both a reminder of the ideological challenge Judaism has presented to Christianity and of the power of religious reform and comity.

The Museo is proud to present *Il Ghetto: Forging Italian Jewish Identities 1516-1870*. It is an exhibit which explores the complexities of cultural interaction—an issue of pressing significance today.



A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE WORD

Or, why the world's oldest ghetto is called the Ghetto Nuovo

In 1516, the Jews of Venice were sent to live on one of two islands formerly occupied by the Public Copper Foundry, called the *Geto*—derived from the Italian word *gettare*, meaning to cast. The island, known as the *Geto Novo*, had been used as a dumping ground for the adjacent foundry. The Jews lived exclusively on the *Geto Novo* until 1541, when overcrowding and an influx of Levantine Jewish merchants to Venice made it necessary to expand across the canal to the site of the old foundry, the *Geto Vecchio*. Over time, the word evolved from *geto* (pronounced *jetto*) to *ghetto*. Hence, the oldest Jewish ghetto became known as the *Ghetto Nuovo* (New Ghetto), while the newer Jewish ghetto is called the *Ghetto Vecchio* (Old Ghetto).

In 1555, Pope Paul IV decreed that all Jews in the Papal States must be segregated into enclosed quarters, which he called *vicus*. The term first used by Roman Jews to refer to these quarters was *serraglio*. However, in 1589, the word *ghetto* appeared for the first time in an official document drawn up by a Jewish notary in Rome; he referred to the area as “*il nostro ghet*” (our ghetto).

In 1633, the Jewish quarter of Venice was expanded once again. This new area had never been the site of a foundry, yet it became immediately known as the *Ghetto Nuovissimo* (the Newest Ghetto)—evidence that somewhere between 1516 and 1633, the word *ghetto* had lost the meaning of “foundry” and had acquired the new meaning of “enclosed, segregated Jewish quarter.”

Although historians and linguists do not all agree on how exactly the word evolved from *geto* to *ghetto*, it appears in documents throughout the 16th century in a variety of forms, including *ghet*, *ghetto*, *geto*, *getto*, and *gette*. As to why Jews outside of Venice used the term *ghetto*, many scholars point to its similarity to the Hebrew word *get*, meaning divorce, which may have represented in the thinking of the Jews of the time, their separation from the larger Christian society. **MSS**



TOP: **Keys to the Ghetto**, Courtesy of the Archdioceses of Ferrara and Comacchio. Ghetto gates were locked at night and opened at sunrise by Christian guards whose salaries were paid by the Jewish Community. The keys in the photo above are to the gates of the Ferrara ghetto. For centuries, the Jews of Ferrara had lived in relative prosperity under the favor and protection of the ruling Este family. This came to an end in 1597, however, when the last Este died without leaving any direct male heir. The pope claimed the duchy, and received it after a short resistance. The ghetto of Ferrara was established by papal order in 1627. BOTTOM: **The Ghetto Bridge, Venice**, late 1930s. Photo by Ernő Munkácsi; Hungarian Jewish Museum and Archive, Budapest. This bridge across the Rio del Ghetto Nuovo, was originally built in 1633 to connect the residential Ghetto Nuovissimo to the lively Campo del Ghetto Nuovo.

The Beginning

JEWISH TRADE IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

Jews came to Rome as traders two hundred years before Jesus was born. When Jews were struggling under the religious persecution of Seleucid Greeks (161 BCE— the time period of the Hanukkah story), Judah Maccabee sent envoys to Rome and found a community of Jews living there. Following the Roman destruction of Jerusalem, Titus and Vespasian celebrated a joint triumph in 70 CE, leading a significant number of Jews into slavery in Rome.

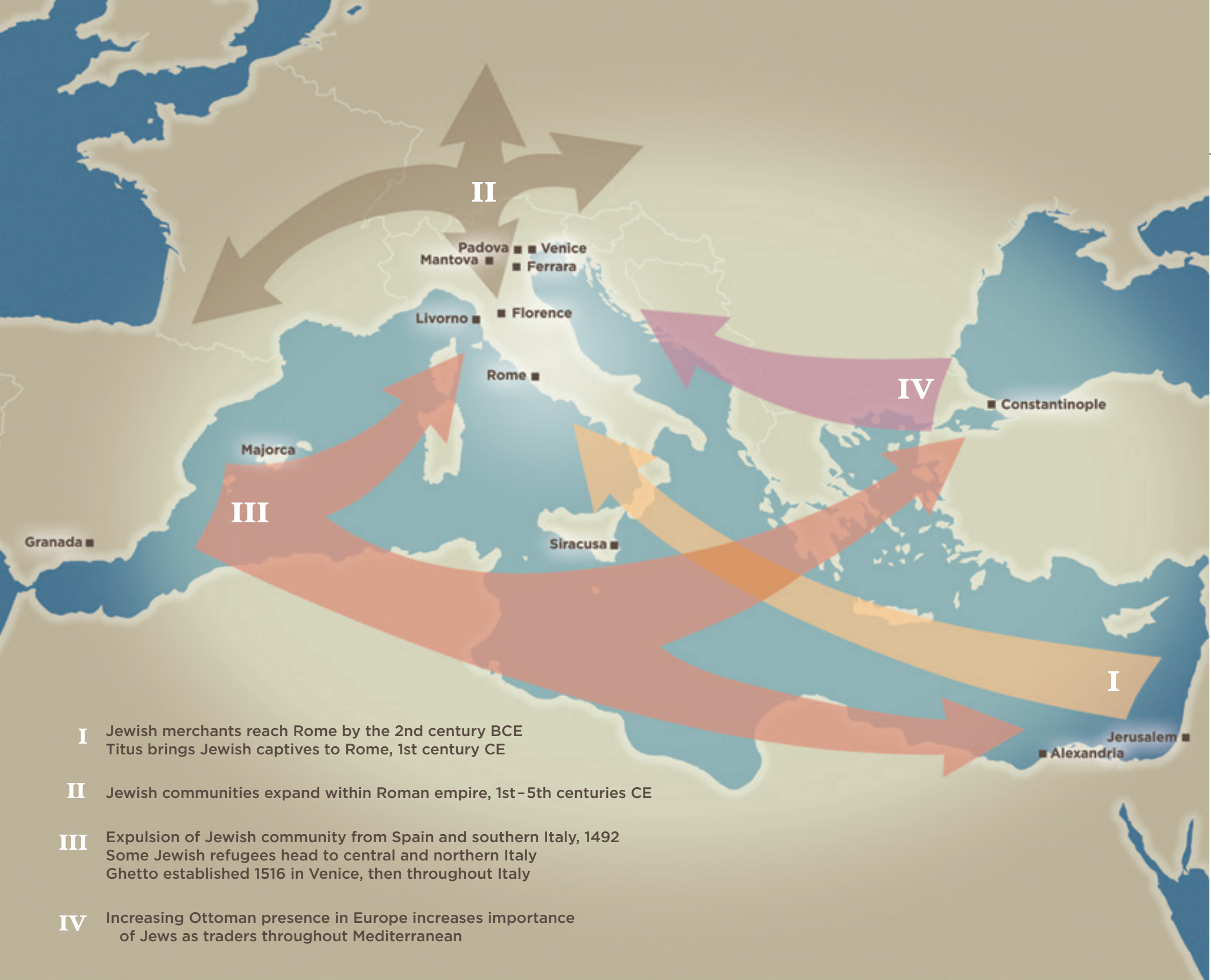


Jews became a vibrant part of the Roman Empire. Within the ever-expanding boundaries of the Roman Empire, Jewish merchants traveled north into Germanic lands and west to Spain. When the Western Roman Empire fell in 476 CE, Jews were well established throughout the Mediterranean world.

As the population of Europe recovered from plague and economic collapse of the late Middle Ages, Jews were able to develop trading networks throughout the Mediterranean due to a common language and culture. Yet, the importance of Jews threatened the Christian view that Jews were condemned by God to a pitiful existence. As the modern age dawned in the 14th and 15th centuries, Jews were welcomed into cities to develop the economy only to be expelled once their work was done. In 1492, when Christian monarchs completed the conquest of Muslim Andalusia, Jews were expelled from Spain and the south of Italy, which was ruled by the Spanish monarchs.

Venice did not follow their lead. Knowing the importance of the Jews for commerce, the Venetians responded by creating the Ghetto in 1516. The importance of Jews as traders increased along with the Ottoman expansion of the 16th century. Other Italian cities soon established ghettos for their Jews. [DRW](#)

Footed Plate (tazza), Urbino, Italy, 17th century. Tin-glazed earthenware. Loan from Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Gift of the Museum Society through the Julius Landauer Estate



- I** Jewish merchants reach Rome by the 2nd century BCE
Titus brings Jewish captives to Rome, 1st century CE
- II** Jewish communities expand within Roman empire, 1st–5th centuries CE
- III** Expulsion of Jewish community from Spain and southern Italy, 1492
Some Jewish refugees head to central and northern Italy
Ghetto established 1516 in Venice, then throughout Italy
- IV** Increasing Ottoman presence in Europe increases importance of Jews as traders throughout Mediterranean

Italy and the Jews

A CHRONOLOGICAL HISTORY

PRE-GHETTO PERIOD

| 161 BCE | 70 CE | 100 | 312 | 600 | 1204 |
|---|---|--|---|--|---|
| Envoys of Judah Maccabee sent to Rome; commercial and diplomatic ties begin | Titus destroys Second Temple; Menorah taken to Rome | Synagogue built at Ostia, port of Rome; the oldest synagogue in Europe to have been discovered to date | Constantine introduces Christianity into Roman Empire | Pope Gregory I strengthens papacy; Jews were protected against violence, but given inferior status | Venetian conquest of Constantinople increases Jewish presence in Venice |

Venice

COMMERCE AND CONTAINMENT

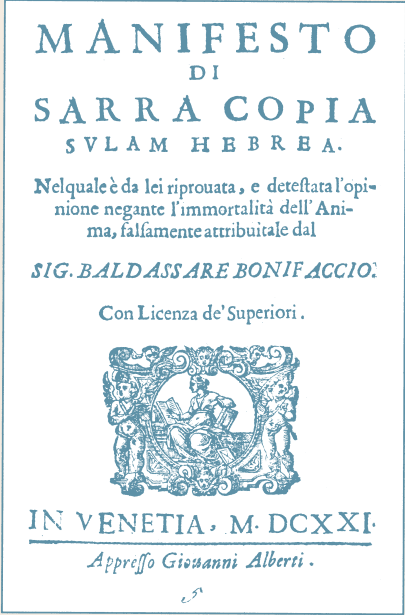
By the 10th century, Jewish traders were active in Venice. The first record of their presence is an attempt by the Venetian government to protect their own merchants by barring Venetian ships from carrying Jewish merchants conducting trade with the Levant. The Venetian conquest of Constantinople in 1204 increased Jewish presence in the city. Jewish merchants also participated in the Venetian trade north into Europe. The expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492, and then from Portugal, brought Jewish merchants as refugees into Venice. Forcibly converted Jews known as *conversos* or *marranos* soon followed. These Jews could make use of the commercial networks they had developed earlier on the Iberian peninsula

Venice required its Jewish community to pay substantial taxes to the Venetian government. Not allowed to buy land, Venetian Jews invested the capital they accumulated in larger economic ventures. This Jewish investment brought needed goods into the city. The business of loaning money at interest, prohibited to Christians by canon law, often made Jews the primary means for the economic development of Venice.

The Church could not reconcile Jewish commercial success with its notion that the pitiful existence of the Jews proved the truth of Christ. And Venetian merchants resented Jewish competition. During the 14th century, Jewish residents of Venice had been expelled, only to be readmitted, but pressure for expulsion continued well into the 15th century. In 1516, the Venetian government devised a new solution: Jews could stay. They had to live in the newly established ghetto, and some were required to be money lenders. Jewish interaction with Christians was to be strictly regulated. [DRW](#)



ABOVE: **Hanging Synagogue Lamp**, 1750 – 1800, Livorno, Italy; Silver. Loan from Judah L. Magnes Museum Purchase, Strauss Collection. OPPOSITE PAGE LEFT: **Interior, Scola Canton** (Corner Synagogue), Ghetto Nuovo, Venice. Photo by Alberto Jona Falco, Milan, Italy, Italian Judaica Image Archive. Renovated numerous times, this synagogue retains Late Baroque and Rococo elements typical of period Venetian interiors.



SARA COPIO SULLAM
VI ♡ MANIFESTO OF THE JEW

Lord, with you at my side, I make ready
My defense since I am abused and harassed
By a warrior who dares to deem faithless
A soul, by Your mercy, with faith made steady.

Unarmed, I enter an unused ring.
I'll make no war against my challenger,
But through His mercy and by God assured,
With chest bared, I will repel his beating.

If, out of dust, You've given weapons flight
For great Abraham against opposing kings
So that he made of them a famous rout,

Renew that example in me, though, no doubt
I am unequal, and let this ink I'm spilling
Suffice to show how worthy is Thy might.

TRANSLATED BY WILL WELLS

TOP: **Frontpiece** of *Manifesto di Sarra Copia Sullam*, published 1621.

SEGREGATION AND INTERACTION

When a city instituted a ghetto, the ghetto often became the only place in which Jews could live. Situated in an undesirable part of town, ghettos were small, affording as little land to the Jewish population as possible. Living conditions were cramped, as families crowded into single rooms. In Venice, increasing population pressure is evident in the height of the ghetto buildings, which exceeds that of dwellings in neighboring areas. Ghetto gates were patrolled by guards paid by the Jewish community itself and locked at night, lest Jews mingle with their Christian neighbors.

Ghetto gates served to differentiate who was Jewish from who was Christian. They also protected Christian merchants from Jewish competition. Yet, Jews would on occasion obtain permits to work by day outside the ghetto walls and Christians would frequent Jewish shops within the ghetto. Jewish culture could attract Christians as well within the walls; the poet Sara Copio Sullam was known throughout Venice for her literary salons, attended by Jews and Christians alike. DRW

SARA COPIO SULLAM

One of the first Jewish literary figures to write in the Italian vernacular, Sara Copio Sullam (1592-1641) speaks in the sonnet, *Manifesto of the Jew* to the Venetian literary world that frequented her salon, admired her Jewish, classical, and contemporary learning and praised her charms and musical abilities.

Sullam was raised in the Ghetto during the period of its greatest splendor. She—along with her friend, Rabbi Leone Modena—built bridges to the larger Venetian intellectual world through their virtuosity. The epitaph on her tombstone is ascribed to him. He also dedicated his translation of *Esther*, a play by Solomon Usque, to her.

The comparison to Esther was also evoked in an epic poem by Ansaldo Ceba’, a Genoese monk, who in 1618 initiated a four year-long correspondence with Sullam—though they never met. Her discovery that this correspondence and exchange of poems, a Renaissance convention among literary friends, was intended to convert her to Christianity, led her to write a series of powerful sonnets. MB

DIFFERENT JEWISH COMMUNITIES

The German Jewish community constructed the first synagogue shortly after the imposition of the ghetto, the *Scola Grande Tedesca* (1528–29). Two years later, the Provençal community financed its own synagogue, the *Scola Canton* (1531–32). In 1538, Levantine merchants funded the *Scola Levantina* in the “newer” ghetto area (called the *Ghetto Vecchio*) where that community had come to live, and Spanish merchants constructed a synagogue for their own community, the *Scola Spagnola* thereafter. The fifth and final synagogue—once again in “older” ghetto, the *Ghetto Nuovo*— was built for the Jews of central Italy (largely from Rome), the *Scola Italiana* (1575).

Each synagogue reflected aesthetic preferences of its respective community and conducted services in the order and form—and with the Hebrew accent—particular to the traditions of its respective community. All synagogues however followed the same rectangular floor plan: the *aron ha-kodesh*, the ark for the Torah scrolls, and the *bimah*, reader’s platform, faced each other across the longer sides of the room while rows of benches lined the longer sides, and a separate, elevated, women’s gallery. DRW

JEWISH SYMBOLISM

Jewish symbols most often refer to objects used in the Temple—objects not employed ritually since the Romans destroyed the Second Temple in 70 CE. The Menorah was the seven-branched lamp specifically commanded for the Temple. Hands joined together represent the blessing of the Temple priests, while the hanging lamp symbolizes the continuously burning incense. The stone tablets of the law resided in the Ark of the Covenant, lost with the destruction of the First Temple. The six-pointed star has long been associated with King David.

One of the ritual objects whose form differs most depending upon the particular Jewish community is the spice box, the sweet scent of which is inhaled at the close of the Sabbath. The German community has tended to favor the architectural form of a tower, while the more orbital shape favored by the Roman community is reminiscent of the thurible, or censer, used in Catholic mass. DRW



TOP: **Ghetto Vecchio**, Venice, late 1930s
Photo: Ernő Munkácsi, Hungarian Jewish Museum and Archive Budapest. The photo shows the narrow core of the Ghetto Vecchio and, in the background, the Spanish Synagogue, still in active use today. BOTTOM: **Spice Box**, 19th century, Italy; Silver. Loan from Judah L. Magnes Museum Purchase.

| | 1215 | 1240 | 1288 | 1437 | 1475 | 1476 | 1492 | 1493 |
|--|---|------------------------------------|--------------------|---|---|---|---|--|
| | Fourth Lateran Council restricts Jewish clothing, lending, living, employment | Codification of Roman Jewish rites | Naples expels Jews | Medici of Florence grant moneylending charter to Jews | Two Hebrew printing presses, one in the southern city of Reggio Calabria and one in Pieve di Sacco near Padova, produce the earliest dated Hebrew books | First edition of the <i>Yosippon</i> — a Jewish collection of history and legend compiled in 10th century Byzantine Italy — is printed in Mantova | Jews expelled from Spain, Sicily and Sardinia | Duke Ercole I d’Este granted protection to twenty-one Jewish families fleeing Spain, allowing them to immigrate to Ferrara; among them were physicians, merchants and artisans |



ERNÖ MUNKÁCSI

This photograph of a Rabbi in the *Scola Canton* is part of the collection of works by Erno Munkacsi, a passionate amateur photographer, taken during the 1930s.

Founder, in 1932, of the Hungarian Jewish Museum in Budapest, Munkácsi wrote numerous articles and books about the Jewish communities of his native Hungary and his beloved Italy — including *A History of the Jews in the Roman Empire*. Several of his photos were published in 1946 in the important book by Cecil Roth, *The History of the Jews of Italy*. He was also devoted to preserving and documenting synagogue art.

Part of the Hungarian underground, in 1947 he published *How Did It Happen*, an important record of the tragedy of Hungarian Jewry during the Second World War.

His daughter, Maya, says her father personally printed each of his Italian photographs. She has entrusted this treasure to the Hungarian Jewish Museum and Archive. [\[SKB\]](#)

Rabbi in the Scola Canton (Corner Synagogue) Venice, late 1930s. Photo: Ernő Munkácsi, Hungarian Jewish Museum and Archive Budapest. We can see this is in the Canton Synagogue, because the *aron*, where the Torahs are housed, is not raised.

TRADITION AND DIVISION

The various Jewish communities of 16th century Venice endeavored to preserve and organize the scholarship of its diverse communities of origin. Contemporaneously with the formation of the ghetto, the Venetian printer Daniel Bomberg published the *Biblia Rabbinica* (*Mikraot Gedolot*) — the Biblical text surrounded on each page by commentators such as Rashi of France and Ibn Ezra of Spain. A few years later, during 1520–23, Bomberg printed in the same format the first complete edition of the variegated discussions of Jewish law comprising the Talmud.

However serious differences regarding the proper manner of interpreting Scripture remained. Venetian rabbis propounding *kabbalah*, a mystical tradition of exegesis, were at odds with those who favored a more rational approach. The Jewish community's leading figure of rational analysis had long been Maimonides (1138–1204), whose formative years were influenced by the Aristotelianism of the Islamic scholars of Andalusia. Leone Modena (1571–1648), a Venetian of French ancestry, was at the forefront of attempts to emphasize reason and to discredit *kabbalah*. [\[DRW\]](#)

CHRISTIAN & JEWISH CENSORSHIP

The advent of the printing press dramatically increased the dissemination of knowledge to both Christians and Jews. People who could not afford costly hand-copied manuscripts could afford a printed book. But with the increase in knowledge came the increased desire for control of that knowledge. The Church restricted the printing of Jewish texts to those texts deemed appropriately respectful of Christianity. Jewish books required the stamp of approval of Christian authorities, “*Con Licenza de Superiori*.” An example of this stamp may be seen on the previous page at the bottom of frontpiece of *Manifesto di Sarra Copia Sullam*.

The *Talmud*, the post-Biblical collection of Rabbinic law and legend, was a particularly contentious issue, as Christians often claimed that this text referred to Jesus in a pejorative way. In an attempt to ward off the censors, the Jewish community itself often censored this work, removing passages that could be considered offensive. Nonetheless, Christian authorities periodically ordered that all copies of the *Talmud* be burned. [\[DRW\]](#)

GHETTO PERIOD

1516–1517

1st edition of Bomberg's *Biblia Rabbinica* (*Mikraot Gedolot*) was published in Venice with the commentaries of Rashi (1040–1105) and Abraham Ibn Ezra, which became the template for all later editions

TRANSFORMATION OF WESTERN LITERARY FORMS

While confined to the ghetto, Jews nonetheless embraced Western literary forms to express their tradition. Azariah dei Rossi's *Me'or 'Enayim* was the first Jewish text to employ a modern historical approach — evaluating the validity not just of events recounted in the *Yosippon* (a Jewish collection of history and legend compiled in the 10th century Italy) but testing Rabbinic legends as well. Dei Rossi also considered Christian source material. Dei Rossi's work reintroduced to Judaism the thought of Philo, long an influence upon Christianity.

Jewish Platonism erupted in its most dramatic form in this time period, echoing the time's renewal of interest in Platonic thought. Judah Abravanel, son of Isaac Abravanel, leader of the Jewish community exiled from Spain, wrote — possibly in Italian! — *Dialoghi d'Amore*, a playful yet rigorous examination of myth, allegory and philosophy of love. Strongly influenced by the Florentine thinkers Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, Judah's work was published in Rome in 1520. *Dialoghi d'Amore* was republished many times and in numerous countries and languages, all while clearly indicating on its title page that the author was Jewish — one “Leone Ebreo.” [\[DRW\]](#)

CULTURAL TRANSLATION

Despite the ghetto walls, increasing proximity brought familiarity between Jews and Christians. The early 16th century was also the time of the Protestant Reformation which brought deepening interest in the authenticity of the Jewish tradition. Leone Modena wrote a Hebrew-Italian dictionary as well as an explanation of Judaism in Italian.

Out of the new Christian interest in Hebrew came a particularly intense fascination with *kabbalah*. While studying the *Talmud* remained a dangerous enterprise, Christian scholars turned to the *kabbalah*, securing themselves from charges of heresy by claiming the Jewish mystical doctrine was in fact Greek thought merely preserved by the Jews. Most well known among these Christian Hebraists was the Christian Platonist Pico della Mirandola. For centuries Venetian and Jewish traders had come into contact with Arab culture. Now in 16th century Italy the educated members of society took interest; the Koran was translated into Italian. [\[DRW\]](#)

1516

First Ghetto: Government in Venice decrees Jews confined to site of former copper foundry; Jews required to be money-lenders and pawnbrokers for Venetian Christians

1519

Isaac Abrabanel Commentary is published in Venice

1520–1523

First printed and complete edition of the *Talmud* published by Daniel Bomberg, in Venice

1529

La Scola Grande Tedesca, the Great German Synagogue, (Ashkenasi) opens in Venice



TOP: **Bet Yehuda**, Leone Modena, Venice, 1635; private collection. This is a first edition of a commentary on the Talmud by Leone Modena, perhaps the major Jewish thinker of his era. As with many of his other works, the tone of *Bet Yehuda* is hostile to kabbalistic interpretation. BOTTOM: **Novo Dittionario Hebraico**, Leone Modena, Venice, 1612. The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. This is a curious mixture of cultures. Modena wrote this Hebrew-Italian dictionary in Italian, but the word lists are organized by *parashot*, the weekly Torah readings.



TOP: **Shylock**, from an engraving depicting Act 2 Scene 8; of William Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice*; Sir John Gilbert. The action Gilbert illustrates occurs after Shylock learns that his daughter Jessica has eloped with Lorenzo — and his money. Salarino and Solanio describe Shylock running madly through the streets crying, “My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter, Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats!” BOTTOM THIS PAGE & OPPOSITE PAGE RIGHT: ***The Miracle of the Relic of the True Cross on the Rialto Bridge***, 1496. Oil on Canvas; Vittore Carpaccio. The Bridgeman Art Library. © Galleria dell'Accademia, Venice, Italy.

SHYLOCK: SHAKESPEARE’S IMAGINARY JEW

By far the most well known Venetian Jew, and notorious trader, is Shylock— a fictitious character invented by a playwright who most probably had never met a Jew. When Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice* at the tail end of the 16th century, it is doubtful there were any Jews in England, the community having been expelled in 1290.

Despite Shakespeare’s sympathetic portrayal of the Jew, this involuntary cultural export both drew upon and fanned anti-Semitic notions. The England of Elizabeth was fraught with Protestant-Catholic tension and xenophobia. This social tension may well have amplified the power of the folk notion of “ritual murder,” a popular English fear that Jews murdered Christian babies to use their blood in making Passover matzoh. Any notion of Jews as moneylenders played into these fears, for it was a simple matter to conceive of the Jew as someone who drained the blood out of the economy, the collective Christian body. [DRW](#)

ART TELLS MORE THAN ONE STORY

Even before the establishment of the ghetto in 1516, the Jews of Venice were required to wear badges or red or yellow hats or caps, to assure that they could easily be distinguished from Christians. This is demonstrated in the painting by popular Venetian artist, Vittore Carpaccio, entitled *The Miracle of the Relic of the True Cross on the Rialto Bridge*, also sometimes called *The Healing of the Madman*. Painted in 1494, the rich panoramas capture a scene in medieval Venice. The intricate details in the painting help viewers understand the artist’s message beyond the title. In fact, the crowd seems unaware of the miraculous healing taking place. Throughout the crowd, scholars can identify various individuals, such as those who commissioned the paintings. Through his accuracy in rendering people and places, Carpaccio allows us to see that Jews, while present, are differentiated from the cosmopolitan crowds by their clothing.

In the detail from the background (opposite page, bottom) Venetian Jewish merchants can be identified by red caps under their black hats. The nearby turbaned figures are possibly not Muslims, but Levantine Jewish merchants, because of their proximity to the group of Jews. In the foreground (opposite page, top) two figures, one bearded, both elegantly dressed, wear wide-brimmed black hats and black under-caps. These were a privileged exception for Jewish doctors or silk merchants traveling to Venice.

—Excerpted from a paper by Marina Del Negro Karem

| 1531 | 1532 | 1535 | 1537 |
|--|--|--|--|
| <i>La Scola Canton</i> , the Corner Synagogue, (Ashkenasi) opens in Venice | Jacob Azulai of Padova is the first known Jewish artist to make a majolica seder plate | Judah Abravanel's <i>Dialogues of Love</i> are published in Rome | Cosimo I de' Medici seizes definitive control of Florence beginning a new era of growth and prosperity for the Jews of Tuscany under Medici protection |



Livorno

PRINCES AND PRIVILEGES

The merchant prince came of age during the 15th century. Merchant families such as that of the Medici of Florence elbowed their way into the social hierarchy of Church and State due to the increasing power of capital and trade, which now competed ever more favorably with the agricultural economies long dominant in the feudal land-based system. Merchant princes had less to lose and everything to gain. They borrowed from and invested in trade, which necessarily meant increasing contact with Jewish traders and trading networks. Trade brought familiarity and an increased interest in Jewish culture unmediated by the Church.

The new power of capital and trade threatened the Church in particular, whose doctrinal antipathy toward making a profit on loaning money (interest), put its finances at a distinct disadvantage in the new economy. The Church possessed substantial real estate in Italy — the Papal States—and the Church made adherence to its views on Jews a necessary condition for favorable political relations. Merchant Princes extended advantages to Jews only to withdraw those advantages as a cost of temporary alliance with the Papal States.



The Age of the Ghetto was, therefore, part of a larger picture involving Jewish trade and its increasing significance in Italy. Jewish communities, violently uprooted after years of settlement and growth, replanted themselves, took root and flowered, only to be uprooted and replanted once again. Jewish culture spread throughout Italy as individuals and families moved from city to city, region to region. Often the family connections within these different cities promoted the growth of Jewish culture, much as it had throughout the Mediterranean world. [DRW](#)

ABOVE: **Wedding Ring**, 16th century, Italy; Gold and enamel. Loan from Judah L. Magnes Museum Purchase, Strauss Collection. OPPOSITE PAGE LEFT: **Borsa dei Massari**, Livorno (detail). Photo by Alberto Jona Falco, Milan, Italy, Italian Judaica Image Archive. This photo is of the detail on an 18th century “Administrator’s Bag” from the Jewish Museum in Livorno.

CONVERSION, EXPULSION AND INQUISITION

The ghetto was a “liberal” approach to the Christian concern about the increasing importance of Jewish trade. During the Middle Ages, Jews and Christians lived in close proximity in Italian towns, ordinarily in separate districts and in peace. However, when tensions did arise on occasion, the solution of the era was extreme violence and expulsion.



Receipt of Payment from the King of Aragon to Benveniste de la Cavalleria Spain, February 17, 1402; Ink on parchment with wax seal and woven cord. Judah L. Magnes Museum, Purchase with funds provided by the Magnes Museum Women’s Guild. This is an example of a note documenting a loan of money from a Jewish merchant to a Spanish monarch.

Jews were expelled from Bologna in 1172 and southern Italy in 1292. Vicenza expelled its Jews in 1485. The Spanish expulsion of all Jews in 1492 applied to Jews living in Sicily, Sardinia and southern Italy, then Spanish possessions. Even following the institution of the ghetto in Venice, expulsion remained common. An order expelling Jews from Naples was proclaimed in 1533 and subsequently in Genova and Pesaro. Pope Pius IV expelled, in 1569, all Jews from the Papal States with the exception of Ancona and Rome.

On occasion, individual Jews and even Jewish communities would convert to Catholicism. Such was the case in southern Italy in 1292 and 1492. Even then, suspicions that converted Jews retained their Jewish identity subjected these “new Christians” to the Inquisition, the institution established to inquire into the sincerity and accuracy of Christian belief. [DRW](#)

BLESSINGS OF TRADE

For those merchant princes not beholden to the authority of the Papal States, burgeoning trade brought not just private wealth but also public good. Mercantile activity provided occupations for the growing number of city dwellers as well as stable income to those in the countryside producing food and raw materials. The hum of commercial enterprise brought wool as well as silk, and spices as well as jewels. Trade introduced excitement, a sense of wonder, and necessarily brought people of differing cultures together, as they came to depend upon one another. [DRW](#)

NAVIGATION AND EXPLORATION

Scientific advancement in boat design and in navigation spurred ocean travel and trade. Greek navigation tools, inherited by the Byzantine Empire and refined by Islamic civilization, enhanced the pursuit of goods and knowledge. An increasing advance

of Ottoman Turkish soldiers and culture into Europe starting in the 15th century brought a concomitant increase in Christian-Islamic contact. Jews, who lived in both worlds, often served as ambassadors and intermediaries. As of the 16th century, Europe was a continent of three faiths, and Jewish traders across the Mediterranean formed a crucial link in the chain of cultural interconnection. [DRW](#)

THE MEDICI PORT OF LIVORNO

The fate of the Jews in Florence and its seaports, Pisa and Livorno, rose and fell with the policies of the Medici. In the middle of the 16th century, Grand Duke Cosimo I took advantage of the commercial ties possessed by Jews expelled from Spain and Portugal, and invited these Jews to settle in Florence and especially in his port city, Pisa. The Jews in these cities also owed their good fortune to Cosimo’s wife, Eleonora di Toledo, who had a close friendship with a Jewish woman from the leading family of exiled Spanish Jews, Benvegnita Abravanel.

And yet, in the later part of the century, the need for political rapprochement with Spain and the Papal States led to a reversal of these privileges. Cosimo thereupon required that Jews wear identifying badges, closed Jewish banks, and instituted a ghetto in Florence and Siena. Cosimo’s son Ferdinando I did not dismantle his father’s ghettos, but he did once again extend an invitation to Jewish merchants— this time to Livorno, the new Medici port (1593). Ferdinando permitted the Jews of Livorno to live outside ghetto walls and to trade freely.

The Livorno Jewish community quickly developed into the most important trading community outside of Amsterdam. Jews came not just from Spain but also from Germany, North Africa and Turkey, bringing with them their commercial contacts with Jews and others from those communities. Jews traded majolica, a glazed ceramic originally from Spain and subsequently manufactured in Italy; they created their own artwork in that medium as well. Perhaps most notably for us, it was the Jews who first imported coffee into Italy. The date was 1632.

The Jewish economy of Livorno was not limited to trade but was a prime focus for manufacturing. Glass and silk factories were established there. A Hebrew printing house was created. Jews in Livorno maintained a monopoly on the production of coral for decorative use in Italy. [DRW](#)



Rimmon (Ornament of the Torah Scroll), Florence. Photo by Alberto Jona Falco, Milan, Italy, Italian Judaica Image Archive. The red decorative pieces are coral. Jews in Livorno maintained a monopoly on the production of coral for decorative use in Italy.

| | 1538 | 1546 | 1547 | 1553 | 1555 | 1570 | 1573 | 1573–1581 |
|--|--|--|--|--|--|-------------------------------------|---|---|
| | <i>La Scola Levantina</i> , the Levantine Synagogue, (Sephardic) opens in Venice | Elijah Levita’s Hebrew grammar, translated into Latin by Sebastian Munster, is published in Venice | Doña Gracia Nasi in Venice for commercial purposes; rescues new Christians, Jewish converts, and her family from the Inquisition | Pope Julius III orders the burning of the <i>Talmud</i> in Rome, Venice, Ferrara, Bologna and Mantua | With his Papal Bull, the <i>Cum Nimis Absurdum</i> , Pope Paul IV establishes the ghetto of Rome; <i>La Scola Spagnola</i> , the Spanish Synagoge, opens in Venice | Establishment of Ghetto in Florence | Azariah dei Rossi writes <i>Light of the Eyes</i> | The <i>Cinque Scole</i> Synagogue, housing five synagogues in a single building, is erected in the ghetto of Rome |



SALAMONE ROSSI AND THE MUSIC OF THE RENAISSANCE COURT

Merchant princes bolstered the legitimacy of their increasing authority by patronizing the arts, like successive Roman emperors before them. Families such as the Medici and the Gonzaga lavished money on painting and sculpture but also on music. They commissioned work for their private palazzi and for public occasions. It was not uncommon for Jews to serve as performing artists such as dancers, singers, and musicians.

Salamone Rossi (1570–1628), a member of the family that included the historian Azariah de’ Rossi, was sponsored by the Gonzaga family of Mantova. Originally a singer and musician, he became director of an instrumental ensemble and one of the most notable composers of the time. In his madrigals, Rossi championed a polyphonic approach to the love poetry of his day. [DRW](#)



TOP: *Il Primo Libro de Madrigali a Cinque Voci*, Alto part book, Venice, 1600, Salamone Rossi. Music Library, University of California, Berkeley, California. OPPOSITE PAGE LEFT: **Plate**, c. 1520–1525. Deruta, Italy; Earthenware, majolica. Loan from the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Gift of Jakob Goldschmidt.

JEWISH MUSIC, CHRISTIAN MUSIC, AND THE SACRED

Synagogue music was limited. The cantor chanted the weekly Torah portion according to cantillation marks known as trope and certain prayers and psalms were sung to a few simple melodies. Over time, melodies for prayers and psalms, in particular, developed in response to the local musical environment. The Renaissance was a time of renewed interest in the past—for Jews as well as Christians. During the 16th and 17th centuries, Jews sought, in their own classical traditions, support for enhancing Jewish liturgy with new musical forms.

Salamone Rossi, the Jewish composer, and Leone Modena, the rationalist Rabbi, were colleagues. In 1605, Modena issued a rabbinic ruling permitting musical lines with overlapping voices, or polyphony, in the synagogue service, and introduced polyphony into his congregation in Ferrara. Rossi arranged numerous psalms and prayers for combinations of three to eight voices, publishing a notable and groundbreaking collection in 1622–1623. [DRW](#)

1575

La Scola Italiana, the Italian Synagogue, built primarily for the relocated Roman Jews, opens in Venice

1587

Salamone Rossi begins composing music for the Duke of Mantua; his music is performed in Venice in the Spanish Synagogue

1593

Ferdinando I de’ Medici issues *La Livornina* Charter, inviting Jewish merchants to settle in Livorno and Pisa

1596–1598

William Shakespeare writes the *Merchant of Venice*



TOP & OPPOSITE PAGE RIGHT: **Medical diploma of Emanuel Colli**, September 18, 1692; Padua, Italy; Aloysius Foppa, illuminator, gouache on vellum. Judah L. Magnes Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Frederic Weiss in honor of Mrs. Leon Mandelson. The University of Padova was by far the most prominent place in Italy for Jews to study medicine from the 16th to the 18th centuries. Distinguished among graduates was Tobias Cohen, whose Ma’aseh Toviah addressed, among other things, kidney diseases and the practice of uroscopy.

COMMON HUMANITY OF ILLNESS

One thing kings, bishops, and merchant princes all had in common was that, as humans, they on occasion fell ill. Here Jews had a particular advantage. Schooled in the rationalist tradition of Maimonides, Jews treasured the texts of Arab scholars that preserved and improved upon the medical work of Aristotle, Galen, and Hippocrates. It was Arab culture that rapidly absorbed the Greek culture of the Byzantine Empire. Jews served as doctors within that culture throughout Arab lands, whether in the Levant, North Africa, or Spain.

In Italy, particularly following the Expulsion, Jews frequently served as the doctors of choice, and it was often as doctors that Jews mixed with the Christians (and in Ottoman lands, with the Muslims) of the 16th and 17th centuries. Since the Jews who served as doctors were often themselves Rabbis, the delivery of medical service quite often served as a bridge for the transmission of culture. DRW

AMBIVALENCE TOWARD JEWISH DOCTORS

Imagine the anxiety of the Christian patron! On the one hand, Christian doctrine cautioned against the importance of the body. On the other hand, Jewish doctors offered hope of alleviating suffering and prolonging life. The Jewish doctor was both necessary and a reminder of bodily temptation. The solution was a segregation of medical training. Jews were permitted to become doctors along with Christians but almost exclusively in one city, Padova. From 1517 through 1721 roughly 230 medical degrees were awarded to Jews and it was customary to give these physicians an exemption from wearing the Jews’ distinctive clothing. For however important it might be to consult a Jewish doctor, it was to no one’s advantage to advertise it to the neighbors.

Such ambivalence could be dangerous. In the town of Trento, Jews were tried for the murder of a young boy, Simon, whom they purportedly had slaughtered to use his blood for the making of Passover *matzoh*. Such fears and accusations, referred to as *blood libels*, were condemned by several popes and were never a part of official Church doctrine. They may have been fueled by the medieval bloodletting practices of doctors, Christian and Jewish alike. DRW

| 1600 | 1605 | 1611 | 1616 |
|--|---|--|---|
| Salamone Rossi publishes his First Book of Madrigals | Leone Modena issues rabbinic ruling permitting musical lines with overlapping voices in the synagogue service | The word <i>ghetto</i> appears for the first time in the English language in <i>Coryat's Crudities</i> , a book by Thomas Coryat | Leone Modena writes <i>The History of the Hebrew Rites</i> explaining Judaism to Christians |



Rome

NEW CHRISTIAN & JEWISH IDENTITIES

In the early 5th century, Augustine, a Christian bishop, articulated what was to become the Church's official view of Jews for over a millennium—the notion that impoverished and dejected Jews served as “witness” to the truth of the Christian faith. Jews existed in order to demonstrate the consequences of failing to accept Jesus as Messiah. Successive Popes issued regulations designed to keep Jews in poverty and otherwise to circumscribe their ability to interact with the increasingly Christian population of Europe. However, the effect of Augustine's theology was not entirely negative. Jewish existence had to be maintained. Popes could not countenance the forced conversion, complete expulsion, or destruction of the Jewish community, as Jews had to remain until the Second Coming.

The commercial development of Europe at the end of the Middle Ages called Augustine's doctrine of “witness” increasingly into challenge, leading to altered Papal policy toward the Jews. As they became more economically successful and important to Christian society, a new explanation for the continued existence of Jews was required. The church's solution was to incorporate Jewish trade in a manner that made Jews as resented as they were necessary: they were forced to serve as moneylenders, a job prohibited to Christians as sinful (usury). Most directly, this policy led to Papal sanction of Jewish residence in various Italian towns for economic purposes. Indirectly, though, the ever-closer identification of Jews with moneylending fed the notion of the Jew as a social parasite and someone concerned exclusively with money. Jews were admitted into society but in a way that ensured their inferiority. [DRW](#)



TOP: **Piazzetta Rua**, Rome, c. 1880. Photo from the collection of Ernő Munkácsi, Hungarian Jewish Museum and Archive Budapest. OPPOSITE PAGE LEFT: **Via Rua, with hanging garments for sale**, Rome, c. 1880. Photo from the collection of Ernő Munkácsi, Hungarian Jewish Museum and Archive Budapest.



Lunette with Aminadab, Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564); Location :Sistine Chapel, Vatican Palace, Vatican State. Aminadab, ancestor of David, and therefore of Jesus, was depicted by Michelangelo wearing the yellow “O” badge. This detail was difficult to see until after the restoration of the Sistine Chapel in 2001.

THE PHYSICAL MARK OF THE JEW

At the dawn of the 13th century, an invigorated Church forged the chains that would hold the newly economically important Jews in a subservient position within Christian society. The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 required Jews to wear distinctive clothing. Jews would now be marked so that contact with them could be regulated and limited. Specifically, the way in which Jews were distinguished served to mark them as socially and theologically inferior. The badge in the shape of a circle indicated their separation from the cross. The yellow color of this badge (and later, hat) grouped the Jews in the same sinful social class as prostitutes, another necessary group that was seen to be tainted by corporeal lust and money.

Social segregation led easily to the architectural segregation of the ghetto. If it was necessary to accept Jews into the social fabric, at least their living arrangements should reflect their undesirable and tainted status. If Venice pioneered the ghetto due to that city’s leading role in economic development, it was the Pope of Rome who sanctioned this form of social ostracism and spurred its proliferation throughout Italy. In 1555, Pope Paul IV, with his Papal Bull *Cum Nimis Absurdum* (“Since It Is Absurd”), created the ghetto of Rome. **DRW**

CONVERSION

While the social isolation of Jews within ghetto walls and by distinctive clothing may have satisfied the social demands of the Venetian economy, Rome was a different story. Here, the presence of a Jewish community, no matter how abased, within view of the Vatican itself, was an implicit challenge to Papal rule. However important it may have been ideologically to preserve Jews for the Second Coming, temporal popes often found it necessary to convince Roman Jews in particular of the error of their ways and of the truth of Christian doctrine.

Successive popes tried to convert Jews to the Christian faith by discussion and forced debates, or disputations. At times, they required Jews to attend church sermons. To deny the possibility that any spiritual truth could be contained in books written following the New Testament, popes could prohibit the publication of any Jewish books except the *Tanakh*, the Jewish Bible, re-interpreted in Christian terms by the New Testament.

In 1553, under orders of the Office of the Inquisition and Pope Julius III, the *Talmud* was confiscated and burned in Rome, and later throughout the Papal lands. **DRW**

THE SYMBOLIC POTENTIAL OF CHRISTIAN ART

One of the tools the church used to reinforce the power of its truth to Christian and Jew alike was art. In 1493, the Jewish banker Daniele da Norsa purchased a house in Mantova. The house had a fresco of the Madonna and Child on its facade. After receiving permission from the bishop, Norsa removed the fresco. Local hostility led Duke Francesco Gonzaga to demolish the banker’s house and compel him to finance an altarpiece celebrating the Virgin Mary. This painting, (shown to the right) along with another commissioned by clergy, were to be installed in the church built upon the lot occupied by Norsa’s house. The so-called “Norsa Madonna” shows the new church being presented to the Virgin Mary, while the Norsa family, identified with the yellow circular badge of the Jews, proceeds below, dejectedly.

If the Norsa Madonna expresses Christian superiority over the Jew, what Michelangelo frescoed on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the early part of 16th century makes quite a different argument. Here, the figure of Aminadab, said to be an early ancestor of Jesus, clearly wears a Jewish yellow badge— perhaps a reminder from Michelangelo to the Pope, of Christianity’s Jewish roots. **DRW**



Madonna and Child with Saints and Norsa Family, c. 1499, Mantova. Originally in the Church of Santa Maria della Vittoria, now in the Basilica of Sant’Andrea. Photos courtesy of Dana Katz , with permission from the Diocese of Mantova.

| | 1618 | 1632 | 1797 | 1861 | 1870 | POST-GHETTO PERIOD | 1890 | 1904 |
|--|---|---|---|-----------------------------|--|--------------------|--|---|
| | Sara Copio Sullam, known as “La Bella Ebreia,” begins writing <i>Sonnets</i> ; Jewish learning flourishes in Venice | Coffee is imported to Italy from Muslim lands by Jewish traders | Napoleon invades Italy; with destruction of the Venice Ghetto gates, the liberation of the ghettos begins | Unification of Italy begins | Italy unified; abolition of the Ghetto of Rome and emancipation of all Jews in Italy | | The ghetto of Florence is razed, allowing reconstruction of the town center, now the Piazza della Repubblica | The Great Synagogue of Rome constructed |



Hanukkah Lamp, 17th century, Italy; Brass. Loan from Judah L. Magnes Museum Purchase, Strauss Collection.

NEW JEWISH IDENTITIES: GREECE AND ROME

While Christian humanists in Renaissance Italy found kindred spirits in Classical authors, so did the Jews. The conquest of Byzantium by the Ottoman Turks in 1453 led to an exodus of Greek scholars and an influx into Italy of Greek texts. The characters of Greek myth were neither Christian nor Jewish, but rather, universal. The Hanukkah Lamp shown here on the left depicts the Judgment of Paris. In this story, the god Zeus refused to decide who among the goddesses Hera, Athena and Aphrodite, was the most beautiful, delegating this unwelcome task to a Trojan prince, Paris. Paris is seated in front of the three goddesses, while Zeus stands behind Paris. The god Hermes, who brought the message to Paris, hovers above. This is the event that precipitates the Trojan War, central to both Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

The Hanukkah lamp on the right is a depiction of Euripides’ drama *The Bacchae*. Here, the god Dionysus introduced his cult into the Greek city of Thebes but its young ruler, Pentheus, did not recognize his divinity. However, entranced by the notion of watching Greek women worshipping the god in the woods, Pentheus concealed himself. We observe the back of the god, his symbols of wine around him. Women celebrate the god while Pentheus spies from behind a rock.

Most notable about these items is the fact that the medium for the depiction of Greek thematic material is the Hanukkah lamp itself. The festival of Hanukkah arose to commemorate the victory of Judah Maccabee and his family and colleagues over the Seleucid Greek empire, which had desecrated the Temple and attempted to impose Greek religion upon the Jews. Here we have the Jewish ritual object of that holiday embracing Greek thematic material, indicating that Jewish identity does not preclude identity with the West.

Jews identified with roman mythological material as well. The marriage contract, or *ketubah*, displayed to the right, seems to portray the groom and bride as Cupid and Psyche, from the 2nd century story *The Golden Ass* by the Roman author Apuleius. These lovers, as adults flanking the Hebrew text, are surmounted by a winged figure of the young Cupid, whose arrow it was that struck Psyche. DRW



TOP: **Hanukkah Lamp**, 17th century, Italy; Brass. Loan from Judah L. Magnes Museum Purchase, Strauss Collection. BOTTOM: **Kettubah**, Groom: Michael ben Shemariah Borghi, Bride: Smeralda bat Daniel Passigli. Ink, watercolor, and gold paint on parchment. Judah L. Magnes Museum Purchase, Strauss Collection

| | 1922 | 1938 | 1943 | 1945 |
|--|--|--|---|--|
| | Mussolini becomes Prime Minister of Italy, then dictator | Fascist government of Italy institutes Race Laws | Mussolini deposed; Italy joins Allies; Nazis invade Italy, begin deportation of 8,000 Jews to death camps | January 26th, Auschwitz liberated by Soviet forces |

AFTER THE GHETTO

Italian unification in 1870 heralded the beginning of full civic integration. The process that had begun with Napoleon’s burning of the Venice gates in 1797 had sputtered under Austrian rule. Now Jews began to live and work among and with their Christian neighbors. Dilapidated, embarrassing, and unsanitary, the ghettos themselves were razed.

In Florence, the ghetto made way for the Piazza della Repubblica. In Venice, a Jewish museum was established. In Rome, a monumental synagogue rose from the rubble of the ghetto, facing the dome of St. Peter. As the modern era of equality dawned, Jews were no longer the “other.” They became landowners and joined business enterprises with other Italians. Jews were not just proud to be Jews; they were Italians.

Nazi hegemony led to the imposition of race laws in 1938, and the backward slide into barbarism culminated in the deportation of 8,000 Italian Jews to death camps. It is impossible to comprehend the enormity of the Holocaust, not just for Jews but also for any hope that there is progress in history. Nonetheless, after the victory of the Allied forces in 1945, reconstruction began. Italian Jews also participated actively in the Zionist effort leading to the birth of the state of Israel on May 14, 1948.

In 1965, the Second Vatican Council reversed the Church’s position on the Jews, acknowledging their common patrimony and making discrimination towards Jews officially against Church doctrine. In 1979, Pope John Paul II visited Auschwitz. On April 13, 1986, paying unprecedented respect to the people whom Titus had led in chains 2,000 years before, Pope John Paul II visited the Great Synagogue of Rome, addressing the Jews as his “elder brothers”. [DRW](#) [MB](#)



ABOVE: **Torah Finials**, 1883, Livorno, Italy; Silver and brass. Loan from Judah L. Magnes Museum, Purchase with funds from the Goor Fund. OPPOSITE PAGE RIGHT: **The Great Synagogue of Rome** (1904). Photo by Alberto Jona Falco, Milan, Italy, Italian Judaica Image Archive. The Great Synagogue of Rome was no mere copy of a Roman temple. This building displayed not just Roman but Greek, Assyro-Babylonian and even Egyptian elements—a proud projection of the variegated history—and identity—of the Jewish community.



| 1962 | 1965 | 1986 | 2008 |
|---|--|--|-----------------------------|
| Giorgio Bassani publishes <i>The Garden of the Finzi Continis</i> | Second Vatican Council produces the <i>Nostra Aetate</i> officially making anti-semitism against Church doctrine | Pope John Paul II visits the Great Synagogue of Rome | 28,700 Jews living in Italy |