

Report by Paul Skenazy, Professor of Literature, UCSC, on Renata Segre's presentation on "Beginnings of the Venetian Jewish Community, 13th-14th Centuries"

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The morning session was an intense introduction to pre-ghetto Venice and Italy, led by Renata Segre, who has been working with a remarkable range of materials on Jewish life in Italy. Doctora Segre is now exploring the pre-ghetto presence of Jews—individual figures and as a communal population—in Venice in the 13th and 14th centuries. She created a broad picture of Jewish presence, particularly through an examination of the lives of a few notable Jewish physicians, while also pitching her remarks to the issues raised by a play like The Merchant of Venice.

As Doctora Segre noted in her response to questions, the evidence branches in multiple directions, and the scanty materials and large gaps in the record leave room for multiple interpretations and speculation. Her main point, iterated through a range of examples, was that people were no doubt present in Venice in the 150 years before the ghetto who **were** Jews but were not known **as** Jews. And so she was interested in describing what she termed a "puzzle" that involved the presence of Jews **IN** Venice but not Jews **OF** Venice during the 13th and 14th centuries.

The chronological moments and central evidence she emphasized included:

Early translations of works from Hebrew into Latin and then Italian

1276 Elia Da Ferrara

and his will, of 1326, in which he detailed the contents of his library, including lists of books in Hebrew and Arabic, and mentioning family names

1331 Leone Judeus

1378-85 Pecorone

1395 Expulsion of the bankers from Venice, but not the physicians

Several points she made stand out to me:

1. That the Jews of this period were temporary figures moving through the city rather than residents.
2. That Jews entered Venice gradually, as Venice itself increased its domain over terra firma, incorporating areas in which Jews were already residing. In these areas, Venice generally left the relations of Jews to their local communities alone except as they infringed on Venetian politics and ambition.
3. That the particulars of Venetian-Jewish relations depended on the confident presumption by Venice of its own rule, beyond that of Rome and the Papacy; this allowed

the Venetian state to ignore or bypass Papal decrees about the Jews in favor of its own interests.

4. That there is evidence of a demand for Jewish physicians, who were in some circumstances allowed to bypass the traditional approval systems of the Venetian Board of Physicians.
5. That evidence involving legal advice, names, and even bills of lading for importing wine suggest the acknowledged presence of and need for Jews in Venice through much of the 14th Century.
6. That the figure behind the mythologies of Shylock was undoubtedly a Tuscan banker, or The Merchant of Mestres, and not a Jew.

In answering questions, Doctora Segre commented that in interpreting history with such an absence of evidence, there is "always a shadow alongside a clear light." Among the most interesting material that crossed from dark to light were her comments on particular words and usages: "gente," "subjeti," and "condotta," words which lose their connotative power in English translation, but speak both to the presence of Jews and the respect often afforded them in public transactions.

Perhaps as important as the material this talk contributed to our enterprise was the insistent reminder that much of the history of the marginal and groups defined as the 'other' must be imagined in the gaps or unspoken implications of the historical record rather than the formal and traditional significance of the documents themselves. Clearly the negotiative process between Jews both individually and as a group was already a part of Venetian life before the formal edicts that we often turn to as the beginnings of Jewish life in Venice. What this truth does to our understandings of, and desire to take meaning from, origins is something that remains to puzzle over in the weeks ahead.