

Response to: Renata Segre, “Origins of the Venetian Jewish Community”
Cynthia Baker

Renata Segre’s presentation made rich use of the very scant and ambiguous information available from ancient Venetian archives. The scarcity of data on pre-ghetto Jews in Venice, as Segre explained, derives from several factors:

- >Existing archives are very limited and those documents that survive are often not intact, leaving significant lacunae in the form of missing phrases, words, or whole passages.
- >Jews did not exist as a visible “community” in duecento and trecento Venice as they did later, but merely moved among the general population as individuals and families.
- >Ethnic or religious identities of people are often absent from written records because such information was “irrelevant” and only appeared if it became an element of controversy.
- >The terms “Jew” or “Hebrew” do not appear at all in the earliest archives hence, scholars must resort to identifying Jews as those who bear “Jewish names.” While these names are often distinctive, pressures to convert or otherwise “fit in” may have led some Jews to adopt less distinctive names for themselves and/or their children.

Despite the constraints imposed by these limitations, Dr. Segre was able to offer glimpses into the lives of several Jews and “former Jews” living and working in Venice prior to the influx of German Jewish refugees – “serfs of the emperor” (among them merchants, bankers, and silversmiths) – in the 1380’s. Amidst the evidence discussed by Segre, a number of points stood out that invite further exploration and commentary: two of these are outlined briefly below.

The earliest Jew to appear in the archives, according to Dr. Segre, is Yakov ben Elia (c. 1270), who served as translator of Hebrew and Arabic texts into Latin and Italian for a physician of Padua. There is additional evidence concerning Jewish physicians in and around Venice in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, including (more than one) Elia de Ferrara (c. 1276), whose library included books in Hebrew and Arabic. Although not addressed by Segre, this evidence for Jewish medical expertise coupled with Arabic fluency raises fascinating questions concerning the origins and transmission of such knowledge and skills, as well as the geographic/cultural origins of those Jews who possessed them. We are immediately reminded, of course, of the translation of classical Greek texts – medical, philosophical, and the like – undertaken by Muslims and Jews in Islamic Spain. What social-historical, material, genealogical connections or networks account for our earliest Venetian Jews appearing as embodiments of that “Golden Age” legacy?

Toward the end of her lecture, Dr. Segre mentioned the powerful Tuscans who preceded the Jews as bankers to the Venetians. Sometime around the year 1378, Venice expelled the Tuscan bankers. In 1380, Jewish bankers arrived to serve the fiscal needs of Venetians. In 1395 Jewish bankers were, in turn, officially expelled from Venice (while Jewish physicians were explicitly exempted from the expulsion decree). It has become commonplace to assume that the association of early modern European Jews with banking derives, in large part, from the canonical prohibition of usury among Christians: no charging of interest, no incentive to lend, therefore, no Christian bankers; Jews

(damned already) step in to service the lending economy. But the case of the Catholic Tuscan bankers suggests that the issue was both more complex and more simple: “usury,” it seems, was “evil” only when and insofar as it was expedient for it to be so. Jews, likewise, were persecuted as “evil usurers” only when and insofar as it served the interests of Church and/or State for them to be so. Finally, the Venetians’ expulsion of co-religionist bankers prompts curiosity about the practice of expulsion: what other circumstances and/or targets of expulsion existed and what light can these shed on the long history of European Jewish expulsions?