

**Response by Russell Valentino, Professor of Russian, University of Iowa
on Renata Segre's presentation, "Beginnings of the Venetian Jewish Community:
13th-14th centuries"**

Renata Segre's highly suggestive presentation gave me all sorts of ideas. As I was still unsure of my footing amid my new colleagues in a new place and in, for me at least, uncharted disciplinary territory, these ideas mostly took the form of questions. Some I got to ask, others not. Some Dr. Segre managed to answer to my satisfaction, others I had to wait to discuss with my colleagues over the next several weeks. Some I'm still wondering about.

An apparently off-hand comment she made about the concepts of "medieval" and "modern" made me wonder: why, as she suggested, can you not use these words with Israelis? Is it because of the demarcating point of the Renaissance, which labeled backwards as it were? So no Renaissance means no Middle Ages. This would apply to Russia too, since it did not take part in the European Renaissance. But Russians use these words quite easily. What is it that makes their use impossible, or at least problematic, in the case of Israelis?

Her remark that the first knowledge we have of Jews in Venice is as translators made me ask: for whom? What were they translating and who was their audience? What was the linguistic order/direction of source-to-target languages (from what to what were they translating)? (The answer seems to be from Arabic and Hebrew to Italian, sometimes to Venetian; mostly in medicine, but also works on morality, religious learning.)

Her comment that just because you don't hear about Jews in historical records doesn't mean they were there made me note the parallel in the history of women. They were there, she maintained, just not in a state of crisis.

Physicians were often privileged when regulations against Jews were being enacted at various historical moments. Why was that the case? Why were Jewish doctors preferred? What about them made them preferable? The learning? Their bedside manner? Their drugs? Their use of particular instruments or avoidance of them (e.g., for surgery)? This was a question I tried hard to get an answer to, both during the talk and after. It still remains unclear.

Dr. Segre described Venice's growth and the phenomena of incorporating surrounding municipalities that accompanied it, along with the forced expulsion (sometimes at the behest of local power brokers) of Jewish communities they encountered living in those municipalities. Where did these Jewish communities go? Were they moved to Venice (apparently not)? Did they go to Mestre? (maybe) Were they moving around as groups? (unknown)

It should be noted that for this presentation Dr. Segre was focusing her attention on the meager historical pickings of the Jewish presence in North East Italy in the 13th and 14th centuries, before the records began to make explicit references to them.

Russell Valentino