

# The Jewish Badge in Renaissance Italy: The Iconic O, the Yellow Hat and the Paradoxes of Distinctive Sign Legislation

Flora Cassen, New York University (fc348@nyu.edu)

## Introduction

- 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council decreed that the Jews had to wear distinctive clothing.
- The Jewish badge was implemented in France, Germany, Hungary and Spain during the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, but in Italy only in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.
- Across Europe, the color and shape of the signs varied between and within regions, but in the Italian Peninsula, it was the same everywhere: a yellow O in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and a yellow hat in the 16<sup>th</sup>.
- Here I use archival material on the Jewish badge to investigate the relation between the Jews and the authorities and the discrepancies of law and practice.

## 2 In all the independent city-states of Italy, both the badge and its textual descriptions were identical

Venice, 1394: unum O zallum

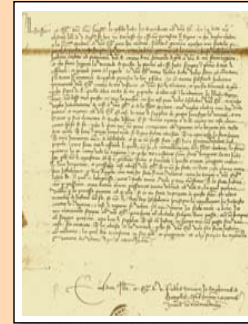
Florence, 1446: unum O ... panni vel nastri gialli

Assisi, 1456: uno .O. de colore giallo

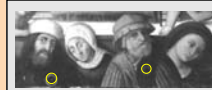
Milan, 1451: *figura in forma de /o/ ... el figuro /o/*

Cremona, 1468: *portare lo .O. como hole in ragione*

Pavia, 1478: *hanc portione .O. p. signale*




➔ The badge was not verbally described but “drawn” into the text using the icon “O”.



Daniele da Norsa, his son Isaac and their wives in the cathedral of Mantua. They were represented below the Virgin on a painting with the heading: *Insolence of the Jews humiliated.*

➔ The icon O was visible in legal documents as well as paintings.

## 4 Clues to the meanings of the O: its shape, color and size

- The O represented zero, nothingness.
  - In heraldry, a round coat of arm was a symbol of bad birth, vile religion.
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- In Venice, Bologna and Brescia, prostitutes had to wear a yellow sign too.
  - In the fifteenth century, yellow was the color of treason, felony, avarice, envy, and laziness.

### ➔ Association of Jews with religious and sexual depravity.

- The O-badge had to be the size of a palm with a yellow rim as wide as a finger. It was small and easy to hide.
- Frequent complaints that the Jews did not wear the O visibly.

### ➔ In practice, the O's size reduced its effectiveness

## 5 The paradox resolved?

- During the first decades of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, all across the Peninsula, the O was replaced by a yellow hat.
- It was a flat hat called *beretto*, *capello*, *pileus* or *cappuccio*; elaborate, though sometimes confusing verbal descriptions replaced the iconic O.



➔ The yellow hat was large and always visible; it bridged the gap between theory and practice.

## 1 The Jewish badge was different in every country

### England

1217: “Each Jew, after he shall be seven years old, shall wear a badge on his outer garment ... in the form of two tablets joined, of white felt, of the length of six inches, and of the breadth of three inches.”



### France

We used to wear the wheels upon our clothes... and my teacher, rabbi Simon of Coucy decided them to be permissible on the Sabbath  
— Rabbi Isaac b. Moses (1219)



Provence, 1363: “a part-red, part-white badge, the size of the great Royal seal.”

Paris, 1269: “a wheel of yellow cloth, sewn on the outer garment on chest and back, so that it is visible.”



### Spain

Castile 1313: “A sign of yellow cloth on the chest and on the shoulders.”



Aragon, 1317: “Their clothing has to be dark and long ... with a part-red and part-yellow badge on the left side of their chest.”



### Germany

1275: “The Jews shall wear hats that are pointed; thereby they are marked of from the Christians.”



### Hungary

1279: “The Jews shall wear a yellow circle as sign; Muslims a red circle.”

## 3 The paradoxes of Papal and Italian policy on the badge

Papal universal Catholic policies were dogmatic: they repeatedly and consistently insisted that all Jews in all Christian countries wear a sign. That was how things should be.



POPE INNOCENT III

Papal policy in Rome and the Papal States was pragmatic: no consistent enforcement, but exemptions and changing rules for the Jews.



LORENZO DE MEDICI

The Italian princes too were pragmatic. When practically ruling their cities, they negotiated with Jewish communities and granted exemptions from wearing the badge to Jews who could afford it. They did not consistently enforce the Jewish badge except when faced with religious or popular pressure.

When legislating, Italian princes were dogmatic. Even though they were constantly at war with one another, they all adopted the same badge and described it in identical terms in the documents using the icon O. A visible separation between Jews and Christians was how things should be.



FRANCESCO SFORZA

➔ In both Papal and Italian policy, there was a gap between theory and practice.

➔ In the Italian Peninsula, the O in the documents represented the theory. In practice, enforcement of the badge was uneven.

## Conclusions

- The law regulated the place of the Jews in Italian-Christian society, but Jewish policy was ambivalent and paradoxical. There was a gap between legislation and its execution.
- The O was a universal sign understood and accepted across the Italian Peninsula, but its small size combined with the speed and breadth at which it was replaced by the hat in the 16<sup>th</sup> century suggests that the ambivalence was deliberate.
- In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, real political will to force the badge on the Jews was lacking. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, with the Catholic Reformation, there was a new determination to distinguish Jews from Christians. The purpose became to align theory and practice; the emphasis shifted from iconicity to visibility.