

The most consistent and chronologically extensive evidence of the history of the Jews in the Italian peninsula can be found in Puglia, in Southern Italy.

One can only guess, as to the origin of the Hebrew presence in Puglia. An ancient Chronicle talks of five thousand Jewish prisoners who were sent to "Taranto, Otranto and other towns of Puglia" by Titus after the destruction of the Holy City. This information, that can't be verified historically, has the purpose of ennobling the origins of the Jewish communities in Puglia by linking them directly to the Holy Land and to that most tragic and glorious event in the whole of Israel's history.

Milano, an Italian historian, writes that "probably more than prisoners they were the first Jewish merchants to come and live in Lucania, in Calabria and especially in Puglia, whose ports faced Greece and the Orient. It is also possible that this first Jewish community, although limited in size, had its origin even earlier than supposed by the Sefer Yosef, i.e. before the destruction of the Hebrew state".

The first official information about the Puglian Jews can be found in a constitution issued by Honorius, Emperor of the West, in three hundred ninety eight C.E. It is known that in three hundred eighty three Valentinianus revoked the law that exempted Jews from the holding of certain public functions. This had been granted to the heads of the Jewish communities from the time of Constantine the Great. In three hundred ninety seven, however, Arcadius restored this immunity in the Orient.

The Jews in the West decided that they too wanted again to be exempt from the holding of public duties (curial charges), but the Emperor Honorius refused and ~~EXHIBIT~~ ordered a constitution to be made, a summary of which was published in Milan in three hundred ninety eight, whereby all persons who had to attend to public duties

had to fulfill them regardless of their faith. The Jews of Puglia and Calabria, i.e., Southern Puglia, protested so vigorously that the Emperor had to intervene directly. Honorius says:

" We have heard that many classes of people in Puglia and Calabria have not been performing their duties and with the excuse of being Jewish feel they are exempted by a law issued in the east part of the Empire, Therefore with this constitution we decree that that law, if it exists, is not valid because in my provinces it is harmful, and we order also that those who are in any way subject to public duties, whatever their religion, to accomplish their civic duties to which they are bound."

This document reveals that the Jewish presence in Puglia at that time must have been conspicuous and economically strong, because when the Jews deserted their public duties, the subject of the constitution, many towns in Apulia found themselves in financial difficulty.

From the IVth to the IX century there is no further information to be found in the literary sources. There exists, however, good archeological documentation, especially inscriptions. This documentation ~~dealing with the Jewish community~~ is going to be the subject of my speech.

Otranto, situated on the extreme south-east edge of the Italian peninsula, was a busy port in the late empire. The oldest document to the presence of Jews in the town is a tombstone dated early IV<sup>th</sup> century.

We have new information about the Otranto community, starting from the tenth century, when during one of the persecutions caused by the Byzantines, some of its members were <sup>killed</sup> martyred.

Going back along The Appian Way, ~~we~~ come across Lypiae, today known as Lecce, which is the main town of the province that has the same name. Nearby there was Rudiae, homeland of the Latin poet Ennius. The Jews are documented as being at Lypiae at the end of the V<sup>th</sup> century. The documentation consists of a funeral inscription that I found in

the Jewish catacomb of Venosa. The inscription is dedicated to a certain Augusta, grand-daughter of Symonas, pater Lypinasium. It is most probable that the Lypienses, of whom we are talking, established a special synagogue in Venosa. This, as we know, was one of the biggest centres of Hebraism in Southern Italy.

3 bis  
most important

One of the ~~biggest~~ centres of the Jews in Southern Italy was Oria,  
a very old town situated halfway between Brindisi and Taranto.

As with other communities in Puglia, that of Oria originates with the  
~~installation~~ <sup>settlement</sup> of Jewish prisoners brought from Jerusalem after ~~the~~ <sup>Talbot's</sup> conquest  
of the Holy City.

<sup>ilvath</sup>  
The Megillat Ahimaaz, written in the XIth century is very rich in  
information about the community of Oria. According to this Chronicle  
the spiritual life of the community was very intense. When Aaron of Bagdad,  
a learned <sup>i z'</sup> representative of the Babylonian culture, arrived there in the  
IXth century, the community appeared to his eyes as an <sup>d \</sup> assembly of "tents  
erected near the water courses that looked like trees growing along the  
rivers"; he also found ~~xxxxxxxx~~ established schools of thought  
"flourishing like cedar trees that grow near water". Some of the most  
famous personages to remember are Amittai, Shefatyah b. Amittai and Amittai  
b. Shefattiah.

<sup>0</sup>  
Amittai b. Shefatiah is the author of the well-known poem <sup>i ai</sup> recited  
in the Burial service of the Roman rite: "Even if a man could live a  
thousand years and could be all-powerful,  
he will still descend into the grave without <sup>e</sup> riches and appear before God,  
the impartial judge. "

I recognize <sup>e</sup> a stanza of this poem ~~xxxxxxxx~~ incised in a tombstone

Brindisi has the honour of ~~being~~ being mentioned in the Mishnah,  
as being the port of embarkation of Akiba and other colleagues  
who were returning to Erez Israel.

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Situated in the Byzantine area, The Oria community became involved in a violent persecution during the time of Basilio (second half of the ninth century). According to tradition, Shefatyah b. Amittai ~~XXXXXXXX~~ ~~XXXXXX~~ saved the town and four other Puglian centres from the intolerance of the Byzantine King. But this is pure legend. Amittai b. Shefathiah hymns testify that <sup>adult</sup> adults and children were forced to immerse themselves ~~XXXXXX~~ in which he calls "the <sup>in Jordan</sup> turbid waters" of the baptism and proclaim the Trinity instead of the One. The apparent <sup>success</sup> success of Basilio's enterprise in Byzantine Italy is re-echoed in a calabrian chronicle of the tenth century: "The Jews were baptized in the year six ~~XXXXX~~ thousand three hundred <sup>eighty two</sup> (that is eight hundred seventy three C.E.)

After the storm, the Jewish life <sup>recommenced</sup> recommenced even in Oria. It was conditioned, however, by all the events that affected the region. So we see the terror of the persecution <sup>alternating</sup> alternating with that of the Muslim raids, common to all. It is not surprising therefore that Shefathiah b. Amittai in a prayer asks God to "Destroy Seir and his father-in-law", that is christians and Muslims.

Oria was taken by the Arabs in nine hundred ~~XXXXXX~~ twenty five; the majority of its inhabitants <sup>was</sup> killed or made slaves.

Some Jews managed to escape to Bari, centre of a famous community.

For Bari also the oldest documentation is archeological.

In nineteen twenty two

In 1922 a necropolis was discovered that consisted of tombs dug partly in the rock and covered with large slabs of tufa. In some cases even the walls of the tombs consisted of large slabs of sandstone.

In the same area in 1923 a small catacomb was discovered, that was

was similar in outline and structure to <sup>that</sup> ~~what~~ of Venosa. Unfortunately ~~it~~ <sup>it</sup> was blocked up with earth. A short while after its discovery the hypogeum was earthed up,

so that a house could be built. The necropolis revealed a few tombstones that came from ~~the~~ open air cemetery situated on the same land where the hypogeum had been excavated.

The inscriptions seem to be <sup>nineteenth-to tenth</sup> ~~IX-X~~ Xth century. They are dedicated

to Yosep b. Shmuel, David b. Manasse, Moshe b. Taddai, Moshe b. Eliah,

Eliah b. Moshe. <sup>of these</sup> The inscriptions, <sup>is</sup> dedicated to <sup>or certain</sup> Eliah b. Moshe, <sup>The gift</sup> is very simple.

Incised, in a very rough way indeed, on a brick, it contains only the

names of the dead person and of his father. On the back, however, there is

something that had never been found before, and that is the title of

Eliah b. Moshe: istratigos (strategist). From classical times it is the

first time a Jew appears <sup>as a</sup> associated with this title. I don't think

that the title indicates a strictly religious office and certainly

not a military office. It probably indicated a high ranking representative

of the community, who had civil and administrative authority.

nine hundred twenty

As we have said, a few refugees of the pillage of Oria in 925 escaped to Bari [which had become Byzantine again in 876.]

In the town, a few years later, Hananel b. Paltiel of Oria started to look for a few of the things that the refugees had saved from the raid. The scholars of Bari contested that, according to traditional teaching, an object belonged to whoever saved it. Hananel's answer is very interesting: Our teachers instruct us to: Follow the law of the country.

A compromise was made and the refugee regained half of his things, amongst which there was an old copy of the Bible.

The Bari community returns to the scene again a few decades later, at the time of the byzantine emperor Romano Lecapeno (920-944).

The Byzantine emperor had aroused an anti-Jewish campaign that was aimed mostly at the destruction of Jewish books. The Jews of Otranto, warned in time, managed to save the holy books. However three learned and pious men were killed: R. Yudah, R. Menachem and R. Eliah. R. Menachem can be identified as the poet Menachem Corizzi. The persecution was violent but very brief.

A letter reporting the facts was sent by the head of the Bari community, the doctor Avraham b. Sasson, to Hasdai ibn Shaprut, adviser to Abd ar-Rahman III, caliph of Cordoba, in Spain.



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Returning now to the Old Appian Way, we find Taranto, where there is a good documentation in the form of inscriptions that range without interruption from the IVth to the Xth century.

Leaving Taranto, the Old Appian Way goes towards Rome passing by Matera, Gravina, Venosa, cities that were all centres of Jewish communities.

Venosa, the home town of the <sup>poet Latin</sup> ~~great~~ poet Horace, is ~~famous~~ famous for its Jewish catacombs. The catacomb was discovered in 1853. The burials were untouched, The hope of finding hidden treasures however brought about the complete destruction of the inscriptions and bones of the dead. About ~~xxx~~ fifty inscriptions were copied in time, many of them were later destroyed. The inscriptions belong to the IV-VIIth centuries C.E.

The languages used in the inscriptions <sup>are</sup> ~~are~~ Greek, Latin and Hebrew.

Considering the relationship of the Venosa Jews <sup>to</sup> ~~with~~ the town council, two inscriptions attribute to two of them the title of "patron" or "patronos" civitatis. It is known that the title of "patron" was given to rich, influential and well deserving people of the town <sup>or</sup> ~~or~~ municipality.

The use of the hypogeums seems to end in the first <sup>decades</sup> of the <sup>VIIIth</sup> century. The Hebrew community started to bury their dead in an open cemetery that presumably was situated <sup>near</sup> a 1/4 of a mile <sup>from town</sup>. Most of the inscriptions that came from this cemetery bear a date, the dates range between 808 and 848 C.E. The era is that of the destruction of the Temple, sometimes accompanied by that of the creation of the world. The names of these inscriptions are prevalent Jewish names, but there are also Greek and Latin names that testify that the Jewish population of the catacombs lived on to the IX century in Venosa, even after the Lombard conquest.

In this time lived in Venosa the <sup>12th</sup> century Sicilians

At the end of the IXth century the Venusian Jewish community seems to disappear. It is only as late as the <sup>XVth</sup> century that we hear again of Jews at Venosa. I believe that the Arab raids in the region have greatly contributed to the dispersion of the old community. We must not forget that the disastrous conditions of the city forced the emperor Ludovico the Second in 867 to plan its reconstruction.

Jewish life continued in <sup>Apulia</sup> ~~Southern Italy~~ until the five hundred forty one, when a public notice was issued by which the Jews were to be expelled within four months.

So ended sixteen centuries of Jewish life in Southern Italy.

Many Jews of Puglia found refuge in Corfu, were up to the years preceding the Holocaust, the descendents of these exiles continued to pray in the old ~~Sardinian~~ dialect of this country. As in the prayer recited in the Haggadah of Pesach : *He will judge it with equity* ~~with equity~~

As we divide this bread, so the Saint, blessed be He, divided the Red Sea, so that our fathers crossed it in twelve columns, and He made for them ~~wonders and~~ miracles and wonders. My He do the same for us this year; ~~and~~ next year in the Land of Israel, free men !"

The words of the prayer express ~~the~~ <sup>hope</sup> anxiety to return to Erez Israel; but the use of the Puglian dialect also clearly expresses their faith to the land that was homeland for centuries and centuries.