

“Adopt and Resist”: The Jews of Medieval Southern Italy



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I. Introduction

It has been noted by many historians that Sicily and neighboring southern Italy, situated as they are at the heart of the Mediterranean, remained throughout the Middle Ages two of the most diverse areas of Europe, and the focal point from which Near Eastern and North African influences made their way to the northern reaches of the continent. The area's strategic value and economic importance meant that it saw over the centuries numerous invaders, all of whom left their own indelible imprint in terms of law, language, and religion. These various groups and the resulting ethnic/religious communities they established will all be discussed briefly over the course of this research paper; it is the southern Italian Jewish community, however, that I wish to explore in depth.

The Jews of southern Italy, located principally in the heel of the peninsula and later in Sicily and elsewhere, differed from the other various communities in a number of ways, not least of which was their long history in the area; whereas conquerors came and went, the Jews had maintained a presence since the days of the Roman Empire. The Greeks, admittedly, could also claim deep roots in Sicily, Calabria, and Apulia, stretching back to the colonial days of Magna Graecia.¹ The differences are greater than the similarities, however. "Greek" culture in the south reached its zenith before eventually being absorbed into the Roman fold, and it was not until the re-conquest by the Byzantine Empire (who were essentially just eastern Romans reclaiming the area from "barbarians") that Greek law and religion came back into prominence. The Jews, on the other hand, had

¹ Abulafia, *The Italian Other: Greeks, Muslims and Jews*, p. 217

maintained their faith and culture in Italy since at least the 1st century BC,² adapting as they saw fit to the changing political and religious landscape.

The purpose of this paper is to understand how the Jews of southern Italy interacted with their diverse neighbors and managed to preserve their faith and culture in comparison to other ethno-religious groups (specifically, the Byzantine Greeks and Saracen Muslims). Whereas the Greeks were gradually assimilated into the Latin Church and the Sicilian Muslims suffered forced relocation and eventual enslavement, why did the Jews escape similar treatment until much later (i.e. the notorious forced conversions of the late 13th century)?

This paper is not an attempt to analyze the intricacies of medieval Jewish theology (although the theological reasons for tolerance on the part of both Jews and Catholics will be examined); rather, it is an examination of medieval Judeo-Italian culture. David Abulafia's essay "The Italian Other: Greeks, Muslims and Jews" will be used primarily for comparison between the three communities; selections from Cecil Roth's "Gleanings: Essays in Jewish History, Letters and Art" and Kenneth R. Stow's "Alienated Minority: The Jews of Medieval Latin Europe" offer insight into the literary and philosophical environment of the south as well as the role of Jews throughout medieval Europe; finally, John Y. B. Hood's "Aquinas and the Jews" discusses some of the theological perspectives towards the Jewish subculture from southern Italy's renowned saint, Thomas Aquinas (himself a native of Naples, a city with a Jewish population numbering in the thousands at the time).³

² Neubauer, *The Early Settlement of the Jews in Southern Italy*, p. 606

³ Abulafia, p. 230

Primary sources are largely in Hebrew, Arabic, Italian, or a combination of the three; those that have been translated, such as Wansbrough's "A Judeo-Arabic Document from Sicily," offer a glimpse into the business dealings of a Jewish community living under Christian rule. Abulafia presents a Hebrew poem that touches on the central theme of the expulsion from Judah and subsequent dispersal of the Jewish people (an important aspect, as we will discuss later, in the Church's initial tolerance of the Jews). These and other historians' interpretations of Judeo-Italian poetry, religious and philosophical essays will be used in my analysis of the debate as to whether medieval Jews acted primarily as mediators between cultures or more than simply a bridge between East and West.

II. Southern Italian societies at the time of the Norman Conquest

As has already been mentioned, southern Italy (the term that from now on will be used to signify both Sicily and all of the peninsula south of Rome, unless otherwise noted) was home, throughout the centuries, to various groups which, despite the inevitable religious and ethnic differences, managed to live in relative peace found almost nowhere else in the medieval world. Before we can specifically analyze the role of the Jews in this society, we must first briefly discuss those other groups present at the time of the Norman conquest of 1130.

The Greeks (or "Italo-Byzantines"), like the Jews, were not newcomers to southern Italy like the Saracen invaders,⁴ but rather an established community with a profound cultural legacy and ties to the area stretching back to the 7th century BC.⁵ Greek settlement was concentrated primarily in eastern Sicily, the tip of Calabria, Apulia, and

⁴ Matthew, *The Norman Kingdom of Sicily*, p. 94. "Unlike Muslims, they were not descendents of recent immigrants, and took satisfaction in knowing that their ancestors had occupied these lands for centuries."

⁵ Abulafia, p. 217

Naples (from the Greek *Neopolis*, or “New City”). These Italian Greeks, replenished in later years by subsequent Byzantine re-colonization, were the principal political force in southern Italy before the arrival of the Saracens, and their traditional religious practices remained the dominant form of Christianity even until shortly after the arrival of the Normans. Both Abulafia and Matthew note, however, the ambiguous fluctuation of allegiance between Rome and Constantinople among the Italo-Byzantines before the eventual schism of 1054. Matthew writes:

“Though the Greek bishops had to accept papal jurisdiction, monks kept open their links with Constantinople and Mount Athos...They blended with their neighbours in various ways according to local circumstances. Whereas the Latin bishop Maurice noted with satisfaction how eagerly a Greek abbot brought some of his monks to pay his respects to the body of Saint Agata when it was brought back to Catania, the Greek bishop of Bova in Calabria recalled with vengeful satisfaction the bad end of a Latin knight who had repressed and persecuted Greeks.”⁶

The Greek Christians of southern Italy, therefore, “did not deny that special honour and even precedence attached to the Church of Rome”⁷ when it came to ecclesiastical authority. They simply preferred to retain their own cultural practices, and identified more strongly with the patriarchs of Constantinople than with the hierarchy of the Latins. What resulted was an official, if not enthusiastic subservience to Rome, and the influence of popular Greek rites and practices on the Church in southern Italy.

The unification of Sicily with the rest of southern Italy by the Normans in 1130 brought about a brief highpoint for the Greeks politically and culturally. After nearly two centuries of Muslim rule in Sicily and various incursions along the coast of southern Italy, they were now subject to Christian (albeit, Latin) monarchs. Greeks enjoyed access

⁶ Matthew, p. 94

⁷ Abulafia, p. 218

to high political offices, were no longer subjected to religious taxes,⁸ and saw the flourishing of Greek as the preferred language of politics. Greek monastic communities even benefitted from royal patronage under Roger I and II. *Furthermore*, Muslim converts to Christianity during this time period more often than not embraced the Greek rather than the Latin Church (“The Greek *papas* or local priest was a more familiar figure to Muslim peasants than the grand ecclesiastics who fluttered around the royal court”).⁹

How and why, then, did the Greek communities of southern Italy slip into obscurity, or at the very least lose all trace of political prestige? Abulafia correctly assesses Constantinople’s foreboding sense of urgency when he writes that “what the Byzantine rulers wanted least of all was that the saviours of southern Italy should not be themselves but the Latins;”¹⁰ Constantinople’s failure to expel the Muslim invaders and consolidate its own power in the area left the path clear for the Normans to do so at the invitation of the pope, thus establishing Latin culture as the dominant Christian influence. While Christian hegemony in the South at first benefitted the Greeks, it would ultimately prove to be of greater detriment to their culture than Muslim rule had been. Before the arrival of the Normans, the Greek communities survived as defiant enclaves of Christian tradition and culture; after the Conquest, and especially after the excommunication of the Byzantine emperor in 1054, the Greeks were just a minority sect living under Latin rule and easily susceptible to the influence of Rome. Royal patronage of the monastic communities meant closer supervision and thus a forced adherence to Catholic standards. Matthew writes, “Greek monasticism itself drew no inspiration from fresh Western ideals

⁸ Abulafia, p. 224. Under Muslim rule, Christians and Jews were forced to pay a *jizya*, or poll tax. The conquering Normans adopted the practice (Italianized to *gesia*), of which the Greek Christians were exempt. Jews, however, paid under both groups.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 221

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 219

and, unable to experience reforms from within, it was liable to succumb to some Latin innovations.”¹¹

Finally, the Normans’ consolidation of power within Sicily and southern Italy, by means of tolerating local institutions and adapting certain preexisting practices to their *Regno*, meant that they could begin the implementation of their own Latin culture. Byzantium’s diminished political importance, as well as the presence of Catholic religious orders such as the Cistercians, allowed for the gradual assimilation of the Greek Christians into the new Norman society.

Whereas the shared faith of the Greeks and the conquering Latins made the acceptance of Norman society relatively smooth and certainly peaceful, it was the distinct differences between Catholicism and Islam that essentially guaranteed conflict between the two forces. In fact, the Norman monarchy almost had an obligation to be hostile to southern Italy’s Muslim population, as it was the papacy that had granted them the “right” to invade in the first place; rulers, whether Hohenstaufen or Angevin, would almost always have the domineering presence of the Papal States play an uneasy role in the treatment of the Kingdom’s religious minorities.¹²

Other factors abound as to why Muslim communities in Sicily and the south declined, however, and in fact the Kingdom’s rulers were often surprisingly tolerant of their Islamic subjects. The Hohenstaufen Emperor Frederick even went so far as to employ an elite unit of Sicilian-Muslim bodyguards that accompanied him on crusade.¹³ Firstly, the Muslims (or rather, ethnically-Arab Muslims), having only arrived in Sicily in the 9th century, were not nearly as historically and culturally entrenched in the area as

¹¹ Matthew, pp. 94-95

¹² Starr, *The Mass Conversion of Jews in Southern Italy (1290-1293)*, p. 203

¹³ Abulafia, p. 227

their Greek and Jewish counterparts. It is not a stretch to hypothesize that a significant portion of the Islamic community (which at its height made up roughly 60 per cent of the island's population) were ethnic Sicilians whose ancestors had converted from Christianity sometime over the course of the previous two centuries, and by submitting to the Normans were simply returning to their original faith.

Secondly, Islamic Sicily did not enjoy the same prestigious reputation as Muslim Spain or even neighboring Tunis, and only became less alluring a location after the arrival of the Normans. Matthew writes:

“Sicily was not famed in Islam for its schools or learning – on the contrary, it was considered rather unorthodox before the Norman Conquest. Nevertheless it had its own savants and poets, and such figures were inclined not to stay, but to leave for Spain or North Africa, which indicates that the right kind of opportunities were not available in a Christian kingdom for Muslims proud of their own cultural traditions. They naturally preferred to make their careers in Muslim countries. The island became increasingly unattractive for devout Muslims as Latin settlers came in from other parts of Christendom, bringing with them anti-Muslim sentiments.”¹⁴

Those Muslims who chose to remain found themselves pushed further and further to the west of the island, and their communities came increasingly under the authority of local parishes. Like the Jews, they became *servi camere regie*, and as such were permitted to practice their religion so long as they paid the *gesia*, and some, like the Greeks, attained positions of importance within the Norman royal chamber. Those who became a part of the Sicilian political framework had most likely converted to Christianity or at the very least hidden their true faith, although this was not always the case.

¹⁴ Matthew, pp. 91-92

Despite the relatively fair treatment of Islamic-Italians in the early decades of Christian dominance in Sicily, “when royal power was impotent, Christian tolerance was not sufficient to prevent terrible massacres.”¹⁵ Conversion, immigration, intermarriage and sporadic incidents of violence caused a drastic decline in the Muslim population of the Kingdom. Frederick II’s forced relocation of Sicily’s remaining Muslims to the mainland (under the noble pretense of religious conversion, but more likely for a much-needed labor force in the area)¹⁶ in answer to persistent rebellious tendencies signified the end of the Islamic era in that part of the Kingdom. Muslim merchants continued to live and do business in Sicily’s port cities, particularly Palermo, and their language and artwork left a considerable impact on the cultural life of the island, but they never regained the social standing they once had before and during the early years of the Norman conquest. Their expulsion from Sicily in 1224 made the Italian Jews the last significant non-Christian element of the population.¹⁷

III. *Gli Ebrei*

The significant presence of the Jews in Italy dates back to the 1st century BC, when conquering Romans transported upwards of 90,000 Jewish slaves from their homeland in the Middle East, as well as numerous Jewish artifacts and treasure.¹⁸ These Jews, according to Neubauer, “were soon liberated by their masters, to whom they probably rendered themselves troublesome by their strict adherence to the Jewish rites.”¹⁹ This makes the Italian (particularly, the Roman) Jewish community among the oldest in Europe, and from the outset they showed no willingness to abandon their ancient faith.

¹⁵ Matthew, p. 87

¹⁶ Abulafia, pp. 226-227

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 231

¹⁸ (Depicted on the front page of this paper)

¹⁹ Neubauer, p. 606

As citizens of the Roman Empire, they moved freely about the peninsula and enjoyed a religious freedom that would last for centuries and existed virtually nowhere else in Christian Europe. Southern Italy thus became the cradle of Judeo-European culture.

The Jews were one of many diverse pockets existing in southern Italy, however, and were not unique in their status as ethnic and religious “others.” What, then, set them apart from the Greeks and Muslims that we have already discussed, and allowed for their prolonged toleration and cultural flourishing? Firstly, the centuries-old history of their acceptance and status as *de populo romano* meant that even the Byzantine rulers of southern Italy, who governed according to the Theodosian Code, couldn’t question the Jews’ “unimpeachable right to reside in Christian lands, and that they were *fideles*, accepting at least the temporal authority of the Roman Church Militant.”²⁰ Those Christians whose rule extended to southern Italy and Sicily were legally bound to tolerate the Jewish communities living there, as long as they acknowledged Christian political dominance.

A document from Norman-era Sicily demonstrates the stable political relationship between the Church and the Kingdom’s Jewish communities that was commonplace before the rise of the Angevin dynasty in the 13th century. Written in the Hebrew year 4948 (or 1187 AD), it is a contract between the Jews of Siracusa and the local Catholic parish, detailing the payment of olive oil in exchange for a plot of land next to the already existing Jewish cemetery:

“So we, the Jewish community of Siracusa, take that upon ourselves, to give to the church of Santa Lucia every year a *qafiz* of olive oil, as contained in the letter of our lord the bishop, which is in our possession. We, the Jewish community of Siracusa and those of our descendents

²⁰ Stow, *Alienated Minority: The Jews of Medieval Latin Europe*, pp. 65-66

dwelling here, also undertake that this oil be collected from us every year at the time of the payment of the poll-tax.”²¹

Their reference to the local bishop as their “lord” is stated in a political rather than spiritual sense. This compliance with Latin law gave the Norman rulers and their clergy little reason to distrust the established Jewish communities, as opposed to the occasionally rebellious Muslims, whose religious beliefs and practices were utterly foreign to the Church (theological differences between Muslims and Jews, in the political context, will be further discussed at the end of this section).

Perhaps just as important as these legal traditions, if not more so, was the Jewish peoples’ amazing ability to adapt as needed to the societal demands of their rulers, be they Muslim or Christian. Adopted practices ranged from the significant (such as the learning and preservation of their numerous rulers’ languages) to the mundane:

“Obadiah Bertinoro (fifteenth century) says that in Moslem countries, Jews remove their shoes before entering a synagogue or house. No Jewish law required them to do so, but because the Muslims who surrounded them removed their shoes, the Jews picked up the custom. Such adaptability helped the Jews to survive in what were often hostile and dangerous environments.”²²

Steinberg exaggerates when he uses the words ‘hostile’ and ‘dangerous,’ at least in the historical time period of which we are speaking; Jews maintained ancient communities in Muslim nations as protected “people of the Book” (one of their oldest and most important sites located at Cairo) and were, as Abulafia states, “one of the more stable elements in the shifting population of southern Italy.”²³ Nevertheless, these little applications of dominant local culture to their spiritual and secular lives didn’t hurt the Jews in the eyes of their neighbors.

²¹ Wansbrough, *A Judeo-Arabic Document from Sicily*, p. 311

²² Steinberg, *Jews and Judaism in the Middle Ages*, p. 19

²³ Abulafia, p. 228

One of the more important practices of the southern Italian Jews that played a large role in the cultural life of their communities was the adoption, and often the preservation, of languages which had come and gone throughout the Kingdom. The Sephardic Jew and mystic Abraham Abulafia, traveling in Sicily in the 13th century, wrote “They [the Sicilian Jews] do not speak only Italian, or Greek, these being the languages of those together with whom they dwell, but in addition they have preserved the Arabic tongue, which they learned in former times when the Ishmaelites dwelled there.”²⁴ This is evident again in the document from Siracusa, which was written in Judeo-Arabic and was signed by Jews with names such as Shlomo ibn Sa‘id and Fadlun ibn Da‘ud (“ibn” replacing the traditional Hebrew “ben”).²⁵

This is important for two reasons; knowledge of Greek and Italian (both of which, to an extent, took on some Hebrew influences in everyday use) allowed the Jews to blend in linguistically with their Gentile neighbors, do business with various groups throughout the Mediterranean, and at times eloquently defend their theology against non-Jewish detractors. More importantly, their knowledge of Arabic was a highly valuable skill in Sicily, which “lay between the Christian and Islamic worlds; it was a bridge between Europe and Asia.”²⁶

Medieval Italian Jews are often portrayed by historians as “mediators” between Islamic and Christian culture, and Judaism as the middleman of the three Abrahamic faiths. Abulafia and Roth are two proponents of this view, and indeed the Italian Jews translated countless works from Arabic to Latin, including the Koran. Sometimes, Jewish intellectuals were employed as translators by popes and monarchs, as was the case with

²⁴ Roth, *Jewish Intellectual Life in Medieval Sicily*, p. 64

²⁵ Wansbrough, p. 311

²⁶ Roth, p. 64

Faraj ben Solomon, who “carried out (among other work) a translation of the great medical treatise of Rhazes...one of the bulkiest as well as the most famous of all medieval compositions” for Charles of Anjou.²⁷ Translation was one way Italian Jews ensured their continued necessity within the Kingdom, and often took great pride in the cultural role they played.

Stow, however, argues that Jewish intellectual life in southern Italy extended beyond the simple realm of translation, and that even in their translations from Arabic to Latin and vice versa, Sicilian Jews imbued a certain Hebrew touch to the work:

“Jews were not simply the *Dolmetscher* – “middle men” in translating Greek and Arabic philosophical thought to the West – that Moritz Steinschneider, the late nineteenth-century Jewish historian and bibliographer, called them. Christians even developed a great interest in rabbinic literature.”²⁸

Whereas Muslim Sicilians often left the island in favor of places like Spain and North Africa, Jews from those very same places found themselves settling in Sicily, and alongside native-born Jews (such as Aaron Abulrabbi of Catania and Jeremiah Cohen of Palermo) they published numerous scientific, religious, and literary works.²⁹ Even if intellectual life in southern Italy never attained the same grandeur as in Moorish Spain, visiting Jews nevertheless commented on the vivacity of the communities at Palermo, Benevento and Naples, where their Italian brethren prospered as artisans.³⁰

The Jews’ occupational status in southern Italy is another reason for Christians’ relative acceptance of them. Unlike the Jewish communities of northern Europe, where the “sinful” practice of usury was one of the few occupations available, southern Italian

²⁷ Roth, p. 64

²⁸ Stow, pp. 76-77

²⁹ Roth, pp. 69-71

³⁰ Abulafia, p. 230

Jews were involved in Mediterranean trade, specifically that of cloth and leather, and often worked as kosher butchers and vintners within their neighborhoods.³¹

In their language, occupation, and local history, the Jews were almost no different from their neighbors and certainly posed no threat to the Christian hierarchy – it was in faith that they differed. And although it seems unlikely, the Jews' very Judaism played a significant role in their acceptance within southern Italy. There are a few theological explanations for this; whereas the Greeks, as a branch of Christians, could and did gradually succumb to Latin influence from the encroaching Catholic parishes (and suffered division from Constantinople after 1054), the Jews, as people of an entirely different faith, could not fall victim to these subtle influences as they were in no way a part of their doctrine to begin with. And unlike the Muslims, who presented a great theological problem to Christians, with their belief in another prophet after Christ, the Jews fit comfortably within accepted Christian dogma; that is, they played a role in Christian theology (the murderers of Christ) just as they played a role in Christian Europe (as translators, artisans, and the evil yet necessary money-lenders).

The Neapolitan Saint Thomas Aquinas summed up the Church's reasoning for tolerance when he wrote "If an infidel Jew asks a convert: Where is your God? The convert should give this witness to the faith: The presence of my God is manifest in your punishment – that is, the punishment of the Jews – which is that you are dispersed."³² The concept of *culpa Iudaeorum*, or the guilt of the Jewish people for killing Christ, was widespread in medieval Europe, and the Jews' separation from their religious homeland was seen as theological "proof" that Christianity, in fact, was correct: "Aquinas argues

³¹ Jews, excluding those who lived in larger cities like Naples and Palermo, often grouped together in small villages centered around the synagogue.

³² Hood, *Aquinas and the Jews*, p. 77

that Jewish worship should be permitted because of the inadvertent witness such worship gives to Christ.”³³

It isn't surprising that European Christians found theological reasons to not only explain but also to accept the Jews living among them; their intellectual and financial skills were in many ways necessary for the well-being of the Kingdom. What *is* surprising, however, is that Italian Jews also looked to their own faith to justify their subjugation to Roman (that is, Catholic) temporal law. Southern Italian Jew Yosef ben Gurion, author of “The Book of Yossipon” (which is a Hebrew retelling of the Latin “Jewish War,” by Josephus Flavius³⁴), provided his readers with a lengthy yet reassuring explanation for their dispersal and subsequent subservience to the Gentiles of Italy. Stow writes:

“If Rome – Christian Rome, that is – was now punishing the Jews, it was not, as Paul had said, because the Jews rejected Jesus but because one of them had committed a ‘crime’ long before Jesus was born [That is, the ancient Jews’ violation in 66 AD of the covenant Judah Maccabee made with Rome]. Here, of course, was not only consolation but practical political advice. For did not the law of Rome, Byzantine Rome, guarantee the rights of law-abiding Jews but threaten those who grew haughty and did not know their proper place (*lex nullus*)? It behooved the Jews, accordingly, to observe the law of both God *and* man. In doing so, they would gain not only eternal rule and glory but also security and peace in the here and now.”³⁵

IV. Conclusion

This policy of righteous patience disguised as humble resignation may be the secret to the Jews’ successful preservation of their faith and culture in southern Italy until the changes in religious tolerance that took place during Angevin rule of the Kingdom.

³³ Hood, p. 78

³⁴ Stow offers this as an example of the Jews’ tendency, through translation, of making foreign works their own, and acting as more than just mediators between Christian and Islamic cultures.

³⁵ Stow, p. 80

Stow succinctly describes it as a strategy of “adopt and resist”³⁶; although the Jews were often products of their environment, every cultural influence was consciously adopted in a way that complemented their Jewish identity. Although so much attention is focused on their role as linguistic intermediaries within southern Italy and Sicily, Jews steadfastly refused to compromise their own language in religious services, and through their trade connections maintained strong ties with the Babylonian and Palestinian schools of Hebrew thought.³⁷ Whereas Sicilian Muslims lamented their “misfortune of living under the rule of unbelievers”³⁸ and suffered the consequences of their rebellion, the Italian Jews sought refuge in their faith to explain their predicaments, and in so doing turned their political subjugation into the theological proof of their eventual glory.

³⁶ Stow, p. 76

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 72. The Palestinian rites of southern Italian Jews would actually become the basis for the northern European Ashkenazim.

³⁸ Matthew, p. 87

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