

JEWISH MEDICINE AND SURGERY IN CATANIA, ITALY BEFORE 1492

IGNAZIO VECCHIO[°], CRISTINA TORNALI[°], LUIGI RAMPOLLO^{°°}, LIBORIO RAMPOLLO^{°°}, MARCELLO MIGLIORE*, GAETANA SILVIA RIGO^{°°°°}, GIUSEPPE ARMOCIDA^{°°°}

[°]Department of Medicine and Pediatrics, ^{°°}G.F. Ingrassia Department of Neuroscience, University of Catania, Vittorio Emanuele Polyclinic Hospital, Catania, ^{*}Department of Surgery, University of Catania, ^{°°°}President of the Italian Society for the History of Medicine, Insubria University, Varese, Italy, ^{°°°°}Insubria University, Varese, Italy

[Medicina e chirurgia ebraica a Catania prima del 1492]

ABSTRACT

The Jewish community was present on the island of Sicily for more than 15 centuries, and featured an important medical legacy, such as Virdimura, a Jewish woman doctor in Catania, who in 1376 was the subject of an appreciative decree by the king of Sicily. Catania owes a debt to the Jews for a long medical tradition, which helped make the island prosperous and famous in the Mediterranean until 1492, when the Spanish King Ferdinand II ordered the expulsion of the Jews from Sicily.

Key words: Jews, Sicily, Catania, Medicine, Virdimura.

Received May 11, 2013; Accepted May 28, 2013

From the period of ancient Rome to 1492, the presence of a Jewish community in Sicily was clearly documented by Gregory the Great (540-604 A.D.) in his letters^(1,2,12,15,19). At the beginning of the Middle Ages the Jewish community's economic, social and religious activities in Sicily were described^(13,14,19). References to Jewish community activities in the Mediterranean area by Geniza of Cairo (15,16,18,21) were also found at the end of the 19th century, and offered testimony of the passage of the Muslim domination to the Normans in the 11th century^(15,16). There are numerous references to the Jewish presence in Sicily in the Norman-Svevo period^(3,15,17), and under the reign of Frederic II the Jews were granted privileges that increased during the Aragon period^(1,3,15). There is more documentation of the Jewish presence during the Aragon period than in previous periods⁽³⁾.

After the expulsion in 1492, the Jews in Sicily were given refuge by other Jewish communities in the Mediterranean^(18,19,20,22). In any case, it is certain that the Jews arrived in Sicily after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and the diaspora in 70 A.D. By the time of the expulsion in 1492 the Jewish community numbered approximately 40,000⁽⁴⁾. At that time there were about 50 Jewish quarters, which were administratively autonomous, within various Christian communities^(1,12,17). In all the Jews made up approximately 5% of the population on the island, with about 20,000 out of 45,000 Jews present in six cities: Palermo, Messina, Catania, Syracuse, Agrigento and Trapani^(4,5,12,15). The Jewish presence in Catania since the 3rd and 4th centuries A.D. has been documented⁽²³⁾.

The Jews were required to wear a distinctive round symbol on their clothes called a "rotella" for men, and a "rindella" for women⁽²³⁾. Jews were also required to pay a personal tax called a "gizia"⁽²³⁾. The Jews in Catania were discriminated against for centuries, and developed a cohesive identity which distinguished them from the Christian and Muslim communities. The Jewish quarters were in the northwest and southeast areas of the city of Catania, and were named the upper Jewish quarter and the lower Jewish quarter.

The quarters contained synagogues and a Jewish cemetery, and outside the walls of the city there was a slaughterhouse where meat could be butchered according to the law of Moses and the Talmud⁽²³⁾. In the Middle Ages the city of Catania developed a flourishing silk trade thanks to the Jews. In addition to craftsmanship and various commercial activities, the Jews in Catania were foremost in some professions, especially medicine, which became famous and respected and was publicized by Joself Abanasia, the supreme judge “Dienchelele” of all the Jews in Sicily, by order of King Alfonso⁽²²⁾. The second supreme judge was Bonivoglia, and another supreme judge was Brachano of Xacta.

From 1362 to 1492, approximately 170 Jewish doctors practiced medicine in Sicily, many in Catania where a few also became professors in Catania’s new medical school^(22,23). Many Jewish doctors in Sicily were so good as to be sought by Christians in Catania. Such doctors include Giovannucio de Ripa, who was the personal physician of King Frederic IV in 1361, as well as the doctors Enrico Campixano (1424), and Antonio De Alexandro, who represented the city of Catania as ambassador in 1423 at the court of King Alfonso D’Aragona.

The Jewish doctor Roberto Bonfiglio was famous at that time (1374), a member of a respected Jewish family in Catania. The Juveni were also famous at that time, and contributed three professors of surgery near the end of the 15th century. There were physician teachers authorized to practice in Catania and the rest of Sicily from 164 to 1492: Salomone da Catania, Leone Masano, Gaudio Muxano, Vitale Aurifici, and many others possessed the precious documents of the time, obtained thanks to the contributions of scholars such as Di Giovanni and the Lagumina brothers^(3,4).

The names of some early medical examiners were also found in these documents, such as Antonio D’alessandro, Enrico De Terrana and De Lo Mendula^(3,4,22,23). In 1448 a certain Aronne De Sacerdotu was the first Jew to be authorized to make medicines. In 1457 Maestro Vita Susan was exempted from paying local taxes in recognition of his work with Catania’s poor. In 1376 a Jewish woman in Catania, Virdimura, spouse of Pasquale de Medico, requested and was granted official authorization to practice medicine throughout Sicily, especially for the poor and handicapped^(6,7). Thanks to Virdimura, the city of Catania enjoys the historical distinction of having the first woman doctor legally authorized to practice medicine on the island. In 1414 the Aragon Queen Bianca authorized Bella di Pajia to practice medicine and surgery in Sicily.

After centuries of prestige in the medical field, in 1492 the privileges and fame ended with the Palermo edict of King Ferdinand of Castiglia, who expelled all members of the Jewish community from the Kingdom of Spain and Sicily, including many doctors, rabbis, craftsmen, the rich and poor. Since then the culture, well-being and medical tradition in Sicily suffered^(5,8,15). In regard to the city of Catania, it may be asserted that the Jewish presence contributed to the development of many activities that helped the city grow^(9,10,11). However, the Jews did not suffer excessive discrimination by the rest of the population in Sicily, and were successful in trade, crafts and financial credit.

In the 13th century Sicily became important in the field of medicine thanks to the Jews on the island, even before the birth of Catania’s medical school in 1434. The Jews solved the problem of the lack of doctors in Sicily. Admittance to the University of Catania was difficult because of the high costs imposed on them. The Jewish physicians were called “Magister” while the Christians were called “Doctor”^(22,23).

Recognition of Jewish skill in medicine encouraged many Christians in Catania to seek apprenticeship in Jewish medical practices. Some so-called “surgeons” from the Jewish community that merit mention are Yoseph de Crixio di Brachono (1422), Gaudio de Girachio (1475), and Aharon di Lu Presti (1429) - member of a well-known family of Jewish doctors (3,23). Another Jewish family, the Xusen (Joseph, Vita and Bulfarachio) became famous in the 15th Century. Originally from the nearby town of Mineo, Joseph was particularly distinguished for his free medical care of Catania’s poor. In summary, before 1492 there was a long tradition of medicine and surgery in Catania and Sicily thanks to the Jewish community, which benefited royalty, aristocracy, the church, as well as the poorest and most humble people⁽²²⁾.

References

- 1) N. Bucaria, *Sicilia Judaica*, Flaccovio, Palermo 1996, 52-61.
- 2) G. Di Giovanni, *L'Ebraismo della Sicilia ricercato ed esposto*, G. Gramignani, Palermo 1748, 266-275, (ristampa anastatica, Forni ED. Bologna, 1967).
- 3) B. e G. Lagumina, *Codice diplomatico dei Giudei in Sicilia*, 3 Voll., M. Amenta, Palermo, 1884-1895 (ristampa anastatica, premessa di R. Giuffrida, Società siciliana per la storia patria, Palermo, 1990).
- 4) G. Pitrè, *Medici, Chirurghi, barbieri e speciali antichi in Sicilia, Secoli XIII-XVIII*, a cura di G. Gentile, Casa Editrice del Libro Italiano, Roma, 1942, 98-108.
- 5) C. Roth, *Jewish Intellectual Life in Medieval Sicily*, in *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, 47 (1956-1957), 317-335.
- 6) A. Precopi Lombardo, *Medici Ebrei nella Sicilia Medievale*, in *Trapani*, Rassegna della Provincia, XXIX (1984), 25-28.
- 7) A. Precopi Lombardo, *Viridimura, dottoressa ebrea del medioevo siciliano*, *La Fardelliana*, 3 (1984), 361-364.
- 8) J. Shatzmiller, *Jewish Physicians in Sicily*, in *Italia Judaica. Gli ebrei in Sicilia sino all'espulsione del 1492*, Atti del V Convegno internazionale (Palermo, 15-19 giugno 1992), Ministero per i Beni Culturali e Ambientali, Roma 1995, 347-354.
- 9) C. Fontana, *Gli Ebrei in Catania nel sec. XV*, Galati, Catania, 1909.
- 10) S. Fodale, *Mosè Bonavoglia ed il contestato "judicatus generalis" sugli ebrei siciliani*, in *Gli Ebrei in Sicilia dal tardo antico al medioevo*. Studi in onore di Mons. Benedetto Rocco, a cura di N. Bucaria, Flaccovio, Palermo 1998, 99-109.
- 11) M. Gaudio, *La comunità ebraica di Catania nei secoli XIV e XV*, Giannotta, Catania, 1974.
- 12) C. Gebbia, *Comunità ebraiche nella Sicilia imperiale e tardo antica* in "Archivio storico per la Sicilia Orientale", 75 (1979), 241-275.
- 13) S. Simonsohn, *The Apostolic See and the Jews*. Documents 492-1401, Toronto, 1988, 3.
- 14) Simonsohn, *La Sede apostolica e gli ebrei della Sicilia*, Volume in memoria di A. Vivian. Bologna, 1993, 511.
- 15) M. Ben Sasson, *The Jewish of Sicily 825-1068*. Documents and Sources, Jerusalem, 1991.
- 16) N. Zeldes, *A Geniza Letter Pertaining to the History of Sicily Jewish in Muslim Period*, in *Zion*, 53 (1988), 57.
- 17) M.R. Mancuso, *Insediamenti ebraici in Sicilia*, in *Architettura Judaica in Italia: ebraismo, sito, memoria dei luoghi*, Flaccovio, Palermo 1994, 154-156.
- 18) E. Ashtor, *Gli ebrei nel commercio mediterraneo nell'alto medioevo* in "Settimane di studio del Centro italiano di Studi sull'alto medioevo", 26 (1980), 401-464.
- 19) S. Boesch Gajano, *Per una storia degli ebrei in Occidente tra Antichità e Medioevo. La testimonianza di Gregorio Magno*, in "Quaderni Medievali", 8 (1979), 12-43.
- 20) E. Ashtor, *La fin du Judaïsme sicilien* in "Revue des Etudes Juives", 142, (1983), 323-347.
- 21) S. D. Goitein, *Sicily and Southern Italy in the Cairo Geniza Documents*, in "Archivio Storico per la Sicilia orientale", 67 (1971), 9-33.
- 22) I. Vecchio, S. Di Mauro, C. Tornali, L. Rampello Jr, M. Migliore, L. Rampello, GS Rigo, P. Castellino: *Jewish medicine and surgery in sicily before 1492*. *Acta Medica Mediterranea*, 2012, 28: 77-82.
- 23) *Medici e Medicina a Catania: dal quattrocento ai primi del novecento*. Maimone editore, Catania, 2001.

Acknowledgement: Thanks to native speaker Frank Adamo for help with the English. English4doctors@hotmail.com

Request reprints from:

IGNAZIO VECCHIO

Department of Medical Science and Pediatrics

University of Catania,

V. S. Sofia 78

95123 Catania

(Italy)

