

JEWISH MEDICINE AND SURGERY IN SICILY BEFORE 1492

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[Medicina e chirurgia ebraica in Sicilia prima del 1492]

ABSTRACT

The Jewish population of Sicily was one of those that may be called "a millenary Jewry". This is our name for groups of Jews who lived in one of the "Diaspora" countries for a thousand years or more. Jews had dwelt in Roman-Byzantine-Greek Sicily for many generations prior to the Arab conquest. The evidence of a special relationship with Palestine, North Africa, and especially Egypt, can be seen in letters from the Geniza Documents of Cairo.

The transitory period between Muslim and Christian Norman rule in the 12th and 13th century, seems to reflect a special influence exerted by the Jews of Sicily and developed during the Aragonese domination, in the 14th century. Jews had a significant role for the Mediterranean economy, but their role was important in the practice of medicine, with an excellent reputation until their expulsion from Spain and Sicily, in 1492.

Key words: Middle ages, Sicily, medicine, surgery, jews, history of medicine.

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The Jewish presence in Sicily lasted about 1500 years, from Roman times to 1492, the year of their expulsion from the island, after the edict of Ferdinand II, King of Spain⁽¹⁻²⁻¹²⁾. Information on the Jewish presence on the island, dating back to Roman times, is very scarce^(10,12).

In the early Middle Ages, Gregory the Great (540-604 AD), with his "Epistles", ten of which concern the Jews of Sicily, has allowed us to draw valuable information on the economic, social and religious life of Sicilian Jews⁽¹³⁻¹⁴⁻¹⁹⁾.

The period of Byzantine rule offers though little historical information about the Jews of Sicily⁽¹²⁻¹⁵⁻¹⁹⁾. The situation improves, instead, in the Muslim period. The Cairo "Geniza" is a place that has considerable Jewish documentary material mostly regarding the period between 1025 and 1266⁽¹⁵⁻¹⁶⁻¹⁸⁻²¹⁾.

The documents of the Geniza, found at the end of the nineteenth century, contain information about the Jews of the Mediterranean in medieval times, including references to the Jews of Sicily, through letters of Sicilian Jewish merchants to the Jews of Egypt and North Africa. The documents of the

Geniza also reflected the passage from Muslim rule to Norman rule in the eleventh century^(15,16).

There is a wealth of information contained in codes, legal texts and chronicles relating to the Jewish presence in Sicily, in the Norman-Swabian period (and, under Frederick II, there are many accounts on the Jews in the economic, legal, and religious fields, and on the privileges gained by the Jews in Sicily, which increased further in the Aragonese period^(1,3,15)).

The documents that testify to the presence of Jews in Sicily, the Aragonese period alone⁽³⁾ are more numerous than those for the entire period from Roman times up to the Aragonese age, and are of Christian governmental origin or of a notarial nature. The documentation on Sicilian Jews in the same period is lacking, as in 1492, Jews were not allowed any time to save the archives of their communities prior to their expulsion from Sicily.

The Jews of Sicily were absorbed, after 1492, almost entirely, by other Jewish communities in the Mediterranean and their traditions have been largely lost after a few generations⁽²⁰⁾.

The demographics of the Jews in Sicily in ancient times and in the Middle Ages, before the Aragonese age, has never been reliably documented, even if for example we know that Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela who journeyed from Spain to Sicily in 1170, testified to the presence of two hundred Jews in Messina and about fifteen hundred Jews in Palermo⁽⁴⁾.

The period that goes from 1300 to 1400 offers more detailed demographic data^(2,3). The figure reported by Di Giovanni⁽²⁾, of one hundred thousand Jews is disputed by later historians, and the figures given by other scholars such as Ashtor⁽²⁰⁾ range between 20,000 and 48,000 Jews on the island.

In describing the history of the Jews of Sicily before 1492, the first thing to be emphasized is that Jews were present on the island for over a thousand years. The second finding concerns the historical 'specificity' of Sicilian Jews. Clearly, the arrival of the Jews in Sicily dates back to the destruction of the temple and the beginnings of the "diaspora" in 70 AD⁽¹⁹⁾. Without going into the merits of the historical analysis of the periods ranging from the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476 AD to 1492, Sicily witnessed the succession of imperial Roman and later Byzantine rule, Muslim domination, the Christian period, the Norman-Swabian period, Angevin rule, Aragonese rule, and Spanish rule.

In these difficult historical periods, the Jewish population of Sicily, over ten or more centuries, was always different, in terms of religious beliefs, from the majority, while coexisting with it.

The Jew of Sicily, not a wandering Jew, but a Sicilian Jew for a thousand or a thousand and three hundred years, was, as such, a servant of the "Royal Chamber", an ambiguous status, which in fact, in 15th-century Sicily, did not deprive Jews, either as individuals or as a community, of any personal, political or religious freedom^(17,18).

Belonging to the "Royal Chamber" prevented the assimilation of the Jewish population into the local population^(1,2,3,4,5). At the time of their expulsion in 1492, the Jewish community of Sicily was composed of about 40 to 50 thousand inhabitants⁽²⁰⁾.

In 1492, the Jewish population of Sicily amounted to about 6300 "fires", calculating that every fire consisted of 6 members. The figure is contained in a document dated June 9, 1492, in which, the viceroy of Sicily, having to affix the royal seal on the door of every Jewish home, whose property was confiscated, ordered the printer Andria De Bruya to print 6300 copies^(1,2,3,20).

The size of the Sicilian Jewish population of 6300 fires, divided into about 52 communities, with a population equal to 5% of the total population of the island, made the Sicilian Jewish community the most numerous, wealthiest and most influential among the Jewish communities of Western Europe and the entire Mediterranean area. It should be pointed out, from a historical perspective, that Sicilian Jewry was closer to Spain than to Italy.

In 1492, there were about fifty ghettos in Sicily⁽¹⁷⁾. The ghettos were Jewish neighborhoods located within the various Christian communities, genuine self-governing bodies, endowed with their own legal status. The laws of the city were Christian laws, while the law of the ghetto was Mosaic law.

In fact and in law, the ghetto was an independent body within the Christian city that could guarantee the Jewish minority its autonomy, both formal and de facto, from the Christian majority, with regard to both legal and religious affairs^(12, 15, 18).

The Jewish population of Sicily, as already pointed out, amounted to 5% of the population in 1492, but unlike the Christian population, which was distributed in all parts of the island, it favored some specific places.

In fact, 20,000 of the approximately 45, thousand Jews, were present in six cities: Palermo, Messina, Catania, Syracuse, Agrigento and Trapani.

The Palermo ghetto had five thousand inhabitants, and just as many lived in the Syracuse ghetto.

The Messina and Trapani ghettos had two thousand five hundred inhabitants each, and two thousand lived in Agrigento and Catania. Along the coastal strip of Trapani-Marsala-Mazara-Sciacca, one-third of the resident population was Jewish and two-thirds Christian. The Jewish influence on the economic, social, political and cultural life of Sicily's cities was significant, indicating that the Jewish roots in Sicily were not recent, but very remote. Different from the Christians, often socially and politically discriminated, in Sicily, the Jews were nonetheless integrated into the reality in which they were born and where their families lived for several generations.

Sicilian Jews owned houses and lands, like any other Sicilian, and ran thriving businesses. The only thing that was not granted to the Jews was the acquisition of an aristocratic title^(1,2,3). Therefore, a Jew could not become a baron, could not be a royal official, nor cover high government positions or command over Christians.

Jews were often craftsmen, shopkeepers, tradesmen, merchants, and bankers experienced in operations concerning the rationing of supplies to the ghettos and cities and trade between Sicily and the international markets of the time⁽¹⁸⁾.

However, in some professions, including medicine and veterinary sciences, the Jews of Sicily made a name for themselves^(6,10).

The government and notarial documents^(2,3) kept in Sicily's state archives bear witness to the remarkable historical contribution of the Jews on the island. These documents have been widely studied and analyzed in research on Jews, by Giovanni Di Giovanni⁽²⁾, the first in 1748 to deal with the history of Judaism in the island, followed by the Laguminas (1885)⁽³⁾, Matteo Gaudioso⁽¹¹⁾ and Eliahu Ashtor⁽²⁰⁾ and many others. The office of universal and single judge, the "Dienchelele" (from the Hebrew word "Daian Kelali" which means the judge general), established in 1395, was abolished in 1447^(1,2,3,4).

The Sicilian population was more tolerant towards the Jews than elsewhere. The Jewish community of Sicily provided good physicians, who, for a long time, were prohibited though from exercising the profession among Christians^(3,8,10).

If a Jewish physician gained a reputation as being an excellent professional and a great expert in the medical arts, as was often the case, he would be granted a special dispensation of the King of Sicily, in order to treat Christians all over the island⁽⁴⁾.

Jewish physicians in Sicily who obtained royal special dispensation were:

Magliucco Greco from Polizzi, Benedetto Vita from Marsala, Benedetto Bonavoglia from Messina, Jacopo Criso and many others⁽³⁾.

Under the reign of Alfonso (1450), Jews were granted the freedom of practicing medicine both among Israelites and Christians⁽⁸⁾.

The growing and renowned reputation as good physicians allowed the Jews to be called also to care for kings and their courtiers, so much so that Jewish physicians were awarded the role of medical officers of the royal family^(3,4).

A year or so, after the slaughter of the Angevins in Sicily during the famous Sicilian Vespers, on January 24, 1283, King Peter of Aragon confirmed his royal and authoritative trust, in Sicily, to master David, Jewish physician of the Royal Chamber, his brothers and other family members, heirs of the famous master Busac, a famous and appreciated Jewish physician in Palermo^(3,4).

Jewish physicians could, therefore, not only maintain the privileges granted to them by the Swabian emperor Frederick II Hohenstaufen (1237), but also consolidate them later, under Aragonese rule in Sicily.

Jewish physicians also gained the privilege for their professional merits not to pay mortgages, duties, and taxes. An influential and appreciated Jewish physician was Joseph Abanasia, who in Sicily became medical examiner of all the Jews of the island and was a member of the committee for medical-surgical licensing, alongside the famous archiater Roger, called "pride of the kingdom" (1404-05)⁽⁴⁾.

Josef Abanasia was the first "Dienchelele", namely supreme judge of all the Jews of Sicily, at the behest of King Alfonso.

The second Dienchelele of Sicily was Bonavoglia, beloved by King Alfonso himself, who often wanted him both at the court in Palermo and during his travels. Other Dienchelele of Sicily was Brachano de Xacta.

Between 1362 and 1492, some 170 Jews were able to practice medicine in Sicily.

A certain Aaron De Sacerdotu was also authorized in 1448 to prepare medicines (first license ever granted to Jews).

A certain master Vita Susan, in Catania, was exonerated on merits, from the payment of local taxes for his work with the poor in the town at the foot of Mount Etna (1457).

A piece of important historical news regards Virdimura⁽⁷⁾, a Jewish woman from Catania, wife of Pasquale de Medico, who asked and obtained, in 1376, from the physicians of the Kingdom of Sicily, the official authorization to practice medicine in the entire Kingdom of Sicily, especially for the poor.

Even Donna Bella di Pajia was granted the authorization to the practice the art of medicine and surgery in Sicily, by the Aragonese queen Bianca (1414)^(3,4).

A famous Jewish physician was Moise Medici who went to Padua, in 1416, to improve his skills, and after three years, he was examined by the archiater D'Alessandro, becoming Dienchelele immediately after⁽³⁾.

After centuries of prestige in the medical field, privileges and fame ended suddenly for the Jews of Sicily after the famous edict of King Ferdinand II who expelled all members of the Jewish community from the kingdom of Spain and Sicily.

Physicians, Rabbis, artisans, rich and poor,

famous and humble, all the Jews of Sicily were forced to meet in Palermo (1492), to be expelled permanently from Sicily⁽²⁰⁾.

Therefore, the island was impoverished in trade, the arts, culture and health. The great shame of anti-Semitism was followed in the 16th century by a slow and sporadic reappearance of Jews in Sicily, and with them Jewish physicians.

The civil and religious government of the island did not grant them the favors and consideration that they had received on the island before their expulsion in 1492. Jews were watched and harassed and the Holy Office of the Catholic Church was harsh and ruthless in pursuing Jews suspected of abandoning the Christian faith, with convictions and expulsions.

As for the city of Catania^(6,8,11), we can say that the Jewish presence in the city was documented as early as the fourth century of the Christian era.

Jewish men, in Catania, always discriminated compared to the rest of the Christian population, had to show the mark of the “wheel” on their clothes. However, the Jews never suffered discriminatory excesses by the rest of the population of Catania, and were able to devote themselves to crafts, trade and lending activities.

From the thirteenth century, in the field of medicine, Sicily became an island coveted by the health professionals who would come from Salerno, famous for its medical school, or from northern Italy, where there were schools of medicine at a university level, to Sicily in search of professional achievement, before the birth of the University of Catania, in 1434.

The Jews were those who excellently made up for the shortage of physicians in Sicily.

Between 1360 and 1492, there were about 170 Jewish physicians in Sicily who made medicine their favorite art.^(3,4) Jewish physicians first met with difficulties, caught between distrust and prohibitions. In the first half of the thirteenth century, the Church banned Jewish physicians from practicing medicine on Christians, and Frederick III of Aragon, King of Sicily, in 1310, confirmed the ban, abolished later by Alfonso of Aragon in 1451.

However, the clerics and the ruling class of Sicily did not hesitate to take advantage of the now renowned professionalism of Sicily’s Jewish physicians, in the face of their own bans.

When the University of Catania was established in 1434, access to the Jews was more burdensome due to the much higher taxes they had to pay.

The marriage of Queen Mary and the young King Martin, in 1391, during the period of Aragonese rule of Sicily, put an end to a controversial dispute over the succession to the throne of the kingdom. The Aragonese court was experiencing in a time of difficulty because both the island’s clergy, linked only to the interests of the papacy in Rome, and the feudal lords, which had become too powerful and influential, had become a serious obstacle to Aragonese “leadership” in Sicily. In this complex context of political struggles, the Jews of Sicily, they too powerful, played an important role.

In addition, it should be noted that the Jews in Sicily, as they were subject to the special legal status of subjects of the “Royal Chamber”, which began in the Norman period and adopted, later, also by Frederick II and confirmed by his successors, proved to be indispensable allies of the Aragonese court, to whom they offered their invaluable support, receiving, at various levels, favors and privileges, which were added to those already acquired.

The gratitude of the Aragonese rulers towards the Jews of Sicily is documented through the many orders given to the nobles of the kingdom to respect the Jews. The subsequent period of Aragonese domination, under King Alfonso, was after the reign of Martin, very benevolent and profitable for Sicily’s Jewish community, which succeeded in consolidating the now prosperous economic and trade activities between the island and the rest of the Mediterranean^(1,3).

Furthermore, Sicily enjoyed a period of peace that allowed the emergence of a manufacturing middle class composed of merchants, entrepreneurs and bankers, among whom the Jews were the most able and professional⁽⁵⁾. The period of Alfonso’s reign recorded, though, the outbreak of an unexpected epidemic, in the years between 1422 and 1425, which led to the need to take advantage of the professional services of the numerous and much appreciated Jewish physicians of the island, who succeeded in acquiring benefits and glory thanks to their intervention^(1,3).

In Trapani, in 1423, the health emergency exalted the merits of the Jewish physician Chanino Maymono⁽³⁾. It should be noted that the periods of medical emergency were not the only ones to ensure that Jewish physicians were appreciated throughout the island, whose major cities hosted Jewish communities that for some time established real schools of medicine known to all.

Of Sicily’s towns, Marsala was home to a

prosperous and thriving Jewish community that had skilled and appreciated physicians.

The same applies to Erice.

A document dated 1452^(1,2,3,4,8) cites Chaim de Faraiono, a physician and wealthy landowner, and “Ioseph Lu Medicu”. Among the many Jews who had succeeded in obtaining a license for “physicians”, we should remember^(1,3):

Abraham Abenset from Trapani (1373), Ioseph from Marsala (1373), Moisen Missuto from Mazara, Machaluffo from Marsala (1375).

In 1404 Iacob Sanson from Marsala obtained a license and in 1413 Benedetto de Gilfa from Trapani.

In 1431, a certain Mathaffuni from Trapani obtained a license. He was also authorized to practice the art of surgery.

In 1438, Machaluffo from Marsala, Benedetto Vita from Marsala and Samuele Mayris from Trapani were authorized for both medicine and surgery.

In 1443, Farachio from Mazara was licensed to practice “medicine”.

Among the many Jewish physicians of Sicily, Moyse Medici de Bonavoglia of Messina stands out. Thanks to the favors granted by King Alfonso, he succeeded in studying at the renowned University of Padua.

Jewish physicians were granted the title of “Magister”, Christian physicians the title of “doctor”.

The widely acknowledged merit of Jews in the medical arts forced many Christians to be the “apprentices” of Jewish physicians.

However, the completion of medical studies required an examination before a “Committee” which, in Sicily was formed only by Christian physicians for a long period of time. Then, the “Dienchelele” (supreme judge of the Sicilian Jewish community), was added alongside Sicily’s Christian “archiater”.

The Jewish doctors were authorized by law to practice medicine only in the Jewish community, but the most famous among them were allowed to practice medicine even among Christians. Some Jews even managed to become doctors of the “Royal Chamber” and “Queen’s Chamber”.

A certain Aharon de Sacerdotu from Geraci, in 1448, obtained the license to practice both as a physician and apothecary.

In 1414, the Jewish physician Manuel Nicosia succeeded, thanks to his recognized professional merit, to avoid a severe punishment, because he

dared to practice medicine even among Christians, without permission.

Sicily’s Jewish physicians were able to achieve a significant professional prestige that helped them even to accumulate wealth that would allow them to purchase real estate in various parts of the island. Once authorized, they also became a point of reference for lending money, which enabled them, thanks to the interest collected, to consolidate their already prosperous economic position.

In their “Codice Diplomatico dei Giudei in Sicilia” (1884-1895) the Laguminas describe the presence of Jewish physicians in Sicily in the following places: Catania, Bivona, Castrogiovanni (Enna), Castoreale, Demenna (San Marco D’Alunzio), Geraci., Girgenti (Agrigento), Lentini, Marsala, Mazara, Messina, Mineo, Modica, Nicosia, Noto, Palermo, Piazza, Polizzi, Ragusa, Randazzo, Monte San Giuliano (Erice), Syracuse, Taormina, Trapani.

In Catania, the presence of Jewish physicians was not only significant by tradition, but also was able to play an influential role in the newborn University of Catania (1434) at the School of Medicine.

The following Jewish physicians are worth being remembered:

Giovannuccio de Ripa who, in 1361, became physician of King Frederick IV; Nicolao de Branca (1324), Giacomo di Licata (1350), Gualtiero Pesci (1367), Nicolao de Usina (1396), Enrico Campixano (1424), Nicolao di Ansalone (1425), and Antonio de Alexandro (1423).

In Catania, the Bonfiglio family became famous and it could also boast a famous physician named Roberto.

Another famous family was that of the Juveni (Gioieni) who in the fifteenth century included three professors of surgery (Antonio, Ieronimo, and Miuchio) at the University of Catania.

The Jews also managed to express an “archiater” of Sicily, Blasco Scammacca, in 1398.

In the period between 1364 and 1492 the “Magistri Fisici” who managed to obtain the authorization to practice in Sicily were:

Matteo Xadicuno (1364), Salomone di Catania (1394), Leone Masano (1422), Jacopo Criso (1425), Farachio (1428), Gaudio Muxano (1445), Gabriele da Lentini (1475), Vitale Aurifici (1492)⁽⁶⁾.

The following surgeons should be remembered:

Yoseph de Crixio di Brachono (1422), Gaudio

de Girachio (1475), Aharon di Lu Presti (1429), member of a famous Jewish family of physicians.

Another family of Jewish physicians in the fifteenth century, the Xusens (Vita, Bulfarachio and Joseph), natives of the town of Mineo on Mount Etna, moved to Catania, and became popular and famous. One of them, Joseph, was renowned for his services rendered free of charge to the poor of Catania.

In various parts of Europe, there were Christian and Jewish women who, over the centuries, were caregivers, especially as midwives, but Sicily can boast the primacy of having had women physicians, authorized by law, with regular title and license to practice medicine.

In 1376, Virdimura^(6,7,8), wife of Pasquale de Medico, a Jew from Catania obtained the license to practice medicine throughout the island after a regular examination before a "Commission".

In 1414, Bella di Pajia, as already stressed, also was authorized to practice surgery in all the lands of the "Queen's Chamber", thanks to the intervention of Queen Bianca, who granted her the privilege not to pay taxes and duties that others had to.

Before 1492, Sicily had a long medical tradition, thanks to the work of the Jews, which benefited rulers, nobles, the clergy, the poor and helpless.

Historically, Sicily's Jewish community, always respecting the Mosaic and Talmudic tradition, was, until 1492, the largest Jewish community in the Mediterranean, after Israel, having a "specificity" and presence that lasted 1500 years.

It wrote a page in history and culture that is to be reviewed and deserves a greater and more stimulating insight.

The Jews, while playing a role in the millennial history of Sicily, managed to find points of contact with other cultures, which led to an "exchange" of values and knowledge that made Sicily, before 1492, a "laboratory" of coexistence and tolerance for long periods of time. Jewish Sicily and Medicine before 1492, set in the right place of universal memory, deserve greater attention not only from scholars of the history of medicine, but also from many others.

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