

Flora Cassen

Identity or Control: the Jewish Badge in Renaissance Italy

The Jews first settled in significant numbers in the Duchy of Milan towards the end of the fourteenth century. Attracted by economic opportunities in the rapidly developing North of the Peninsula, they received permission to live anywhere in the Duchy except in the city of Milan itself, and to exercise their religion and professions freely. Administratively they were under the authority of local captains and communal councils, parish priests, the archbishop, and the Duke and the senate in Milan. When Milan became a Spanish possession in the middle of the sixteenth century, Spain's monarch, Philip II, claimed jurisdiction over the Jews too, adding a new layer of bureaucracy to an already complex power structure. Surprisingly, the Spanish king took interest in the Jews' situation and personally approved every important decision concerning them, including the question of whether the Jews ought to wear an identifying mark or not—even though there were only about nine hundred Jews living in Milan at the time and Philip II ruled over a vast empire stretching across both the Mediterranean and the Atlantic. Thus the Jewish badge became the subject of intense negotiations between administrative authorities at all levels, going from the Italian countryside to the center of the Spanish empire in Madrid.

Using new material from Italian and Spanish archives, this presentation analyzes the multifaceted interactions of all these authorities regarding the Jews. It shows that the Jews were often the objects of power struggles between competing authorities and that Philip II played a key role in the lives of Milanese Jewry. Indeed

he had the final say on their fate and expelled them from the Duchy in 1597. The Jews understood this situation quite well and displayed not only an intimate familiarity with the intricate and volatile political organization of the Italian Peninsula but also a deep knowledge of how the Spanish empire functioned. Thus while previous scholarship had focused on the Jewish badge as a tool of identification, the evidence that I discuss here suggests a more nuanced and complex reality in which the Jewish badge was a tool of power that could also be used to negotiate with or dominate rival Christian authorities. Moreover, due to the interest it generated at all levels, Jewish badge legislation and negotiations shine a new light onto the construction of the early modern state, the workings of the Spanish empire, and sixteenth century diplomacy.