### The Jewish Badge in Renaissance Italy: The Iconic O, the Yellow Hat and the Paradoxes of Distinctive Sign Legislation

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#### Introduction
- 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council decreed that the Jews had to wear distinctive clothing.
- The Jewish badge was implemented in France, Germany, Hungary and Spain during the 13th and 14th centuries, but in Italy only in the 15th century.
- Across Europe, the color and shape of the signs varied between and within regions, but in the Italian Peninsula, it was the same everywhere: a yellow O in the 15th century and a yellow hat in the 16th.
- Here I use archival material on the Jewish badge to investigate the relation between the Jews and the authorities and the discrepancies of law and practice.

#### 1 The Jewish badge was different in every country

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>1217: &quot;Each Jew, after he shall be seven years old, shall wear a badge on his outer garment ... in the form of two tablets joined, of white felt, of the length of six inches, and of the breadth of three inches.&quot;</td>
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<td>France</td>
<td>We used to wear the wheels upon our clothes ... and my teacher, rabbi Simon of Coucy decided them to be permissible on the Sabbath. — Rabbi Isaac b. Moses (1219)</td>
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<td>Spain</td>
<td>Castile 1313: &quot;A sign of yellow cloth on the chest and on the shoulders.&quot; Aragon, 1317: &quot;Their clothing has to be dark and long ... with a part-red and part-yellow badge on the left side of their chest.&quot;</td>
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<td>Germany</td>
<td>1275: &quot;The Jews shall wear hats that are pointed; thereby they are marked of from the Christians.&quot;</td>
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<td>Hungary</td>
<td>1279: &quot;The Jews shall wear a yellow circle as sign; Muslims a red circle.&quot;</td>
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#### 2 In all the independent city-states of Italy, both the badge and its textual descriptions were identical

- Venice, 1394: unum O zallum
- Florence, 1446: unum O ... panni vel nastri gialli
- Assisi, 1456: uno .O. de colore giallo
- Milan, 1451: ... "una olla del color giallo"
- Cremona, 1468: ... “apreta per ben giallo e pulito”
- Pavia, 1478: ... “apreta per ben giallo e pulito, mon Vermon.”

#### 3 The paradoxes of Papal and Italian policy on the badge

- **Papal universal Catholic policies** were dogmatic: they repeatedly and consistently insisted that all Jews in all Christian countries wear a sign. That is how things should be.
- **Papal policy in Rome and the Papal States** was pragmatic: no consistent enforcement, but exemptions and changing rules for the Jews.

#### 4 Clues to the meanings of the O: its shape, color and size

- The O represented zero, nothingness. In heraldry, a round coat of arm was a symbol of bad birth, vile religion.
- In Venice, Bologna and Brescia, prostitutes had to wear a yellow sign too.
- In the fifteenth century, yellow was the color of treason, felony, avarice, envy, and laziness.

#### 5 The paradox resolved?

- During the first decades of the 16th century, all across the Peninsula, the O was replaced by a yellow hat.
- It was a flat hat called beretto, capello, pileus or cappuccio: elaborate, though sometimes confusing verbal descriptions replaced the iconic O.

#### Conclusions

- The law regulated the place of the Jews in Italian-Christian society, but Jewish policy was ambivalent and paradoxical. There was a gap between legislation and its execution.
- The O was a universal sign understood and accepted across the Italian Peninsula, but its small size combined with the speed and breadth at which it was replaced by the hat in the 16th century suggests that the ambivalence was deliberate.
- In the 15th century, real political will to force the badge on the Jews was lacking. In the 16th century, with the Catholic Reformation, there was a new determination to distinguish Jews from Christians. The purpose became to align theory and practice; the emphasis shifted from iconicity to visibility.