



Inquisizioni

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Superiore di Pisa  
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EDIZIONI  
DELLA  
NORMALE





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Scuola Normale Superiore

Piazza dei Cavalieri, 7

56126 Pisa

tel. 0039 050 509220

fax 0039 050 509278

[edizioni@sns.it](mailto:edizioni@sns.it) – [segreteria.annali@sns.it](mailto:segreteria.annali@sns.it)

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# Rumours, Gossip and Crypto-Jewish Identity in the Sixteenth-Century Venetian Inquisition

Giorgos Plakotos

## 1. 'Fama' as a legal tool

In theory, an inquisitorial hearing in the tribunals of the Roman Inquisition could be instituted in two ways, as codified in Eliseo Masini's widely read procedural manual *Sacro Arsenale*, the first manual written in Italian by a practicing inquisitor. The first way was by denunciation; the second was based on the inquisitor's discretion to initiate an inquiry by right of his office after rumours and a 'public and common voice' about heretical activities came to his notice<sup>1</sup>. The provision that the inquisitor should act *ex officio* when rumours were circulating probably had more value in theory than in practice. In Venice the overwhelming majority of hearings were the result of denunciations which were submitted either anonymously in written form or presented orally by delators before the tribunal<sup>2</sup>. However, rumours were a regular feature in

I wish to thank Chris Black from the University of Glasgow, Rika Benveniste and Androniki Dialeti from the University of Thessaly and Costas Gaganakis from the University of Athens for their ideas and comments.

The following abbreviations have been used: ASVe = Archivio di Stato di Venezia; SU = Sant'Uffizio; b. = busta; proc. = processo; test. = testimony of. All translations are by the author.

<sup>1</sup> E. MASINI, *Sacro Arsenale ovvero Pratica dell'Ufficio della Santa Inquisitione. Di nuovo corretto & ampliato*, in Genova & in Perugia, nella Stampa Camerale appresso Sebastiano Zecchini, 1653, pp. 24-31. First published in 1621, Masini's manual had at least ten print runs during the 17th and the early 18th centuries: A. ERRERA, *Processus in causa fidei. L'evoluzione dei manuali inquisitoriali nei secoli XVI-XVIII e il manuale inedito di un inquisitore perugino*, Bologna 2000, pp. 264-5. It may be considered to be the manual that most successfully codified the procedures of the Roman Inquisition, at least after the 1580s, as the author served as inquisitor in Genoa from 1609 to 1627.

<sup>2</sup> This is based on B. PULLAN, *The Jews of Europe and the Inquisition of Venice, 1550-1670*, Oxford 1983, pp. 93-4; A. JACOBSON SCHUTTE, *Aspiring Saints. Pretense of Holiness*,

denunciations and witnesses' testimonies. The Inquisition dealt with a variety of evidence ranging from 'concrete proof', which included facts and general indications of deviance, to hearsay evidence (*fama e voce publica*). This constituted an acceptable form of evidence to be seriously considered by Inquisition tribunals.

*Fama* had been a ubiquitous and ambiguous term in legal practice and theory since the medieval period as it stood for rumour, reputation and common knowledge. The Roman Inquisition inherited *fama* as a legal concept from the ecclesiastical courts of the thirteenth century, when *fama* was central to ex officio prosecutions<sup>3</sup>. Hearsay evidence also featured in other criminal and civil courts. In the Venetian legal system *publica voce e fama* were duly discussed in several legal texts, and rumours occasionally played an important role in the substance of a crime in the magistracy of the *Esecutori contro la Bestemmia*, as codified by Marcantonio Tirabosco, one of the magistracy's officials, in his *Prattica Criminale*<sup>4</sup>. Rumours and gossip were also recognised

*Inquisition, and Gender in the Republic of Venice, 1618-1750*, Baltimore-London 2001, p. 37; and my reading of cases from the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries. Perhaps one of the few cases, and as far as crypto-Judaism is concerned the only one, in which the inquisitor acted by right of office was in 1473: «publica vox et fama est quod in civitate Venetiarum dicitur esse quamplures Christianos qui ritum et mores Iudeorum preservant appellatos vulgariter Christianos Novelos [...] in qua causa ex officio suo procedere intendit» (Archivio Storico del Patriarcato di Venezia, Criminalia S. Inquisitionis, b. 1 [1461-1558], fasc. 135<sup>r</sup>).

<sup>3</sup> Some of these ambiguities and subtleties of *fama* in legal acts are highlighted in C. WICKHAM, *Fama and the Law in Twelfth-Century Tuscany*, in T. FENSTER, D. LORD SMAIL (edd.), *Fama: The Politics of Talk and Reputation in Medieval Europe*, Ithaca 2003, pp. 15-26; T. KUEHN, *Fama as a Legal Status in Renaissance Florence*, *ibid.*, pp. 27-46; A. BETTONI, *Voci malevole. Fama, notizia del crimine e azione del giudice nel processo criminale (secc. XVI-XVII)*, «Quaderni storici», 121, 2006, pp. 13-38. On the development of the inquisitorial procedure in the thirteenth century: J. LANGBEIN, *Prosecuting Crime in the Renaissance. England, Germany, France*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1974; M. SBRICCOLI, «Vidi communiter observari». *L'emersione di un ordine penale pubblico nelle città italiane del secolo XIII*, «Quaderni fiorentini per la storia del pensiero giuridico moderno», 27, 1998, pp. 231-68; G. ALESSI, *Il processo penale. Profilo storico*, Roma-Bari, 2001. On the place of *fama* in medieval civil and canon law: F. MIGLIORINO, *Fama e infamia. Problemi della società medievale nel pensiero giuridico nei secoli XII e XIII*, Catania 1985; P. PRODI, *Una storia della giustizia. Dal pluralismo dei fori al moderno dualismo tra coscienza e diritto*, Bologna 2000, pp. 96-7.

<sup>4</sup> R. DEROSAS, *Moralità e giustizia a Venezia nel '500-'600. Gli Esecutori contro la*

in marriage litigations before the magistracy of the *Avogaria di Comun* and Venice's Patriarchal Court<sup>5</sup>. Although under certain circumstances hearsay evidence was significant in legal proceedings, gossip and rumours about political affairs were a constant concern for the Venetian elite, who deemed secrecy as a fundamental principle of government<sup>6</sup>.

This article seeks to examine the dissemination and circulation of rumours about the presence of alleged crypto-Jews in sixteenth-century Venice and to offer insights into how Christians of different status and origin perceived, with whatever distortions, the beliefs and practices of those accused of crypto-Judaism<sup>7</sup>. The article draws on the work of social anthropologists and sociologists who have long shown an interest in the study of rumour and gossip. Rumour and gossip have been found to be instrumental in the maintenance of group coherence and reinforcing communal norms<sup>8</sup>. At the same time, deviance is identified through gossip and rumour. Thus, this article examines rumours and gossip to illustrate ordinary Venetians' awareness of crypto-Judaism and their attempts to define standards of behaviour. Rumours emerge and spread in ambiguous situations<sup>9</sup>. The presence of alleged crypto-Jews outside the Ghetto among the city's Catholic population was a situation that

*Bestemmia*, in G. COZZI (ed.), *Stato, società e giustizia nella repubblica veneta (sec. XV-XVIII)*, Roma 1980, pp. 462-7, 527-8; E. HORODOWICH, *The Gossiping Tongue: Oral Networks, Public Life and Political Culture in Early Modern Venice*, «Renaissance Studies», 19, 2005, pp. 22-45: 42-3.

<sup>5</sup> A. COWAN, *Gossip and Street Culture in Early Modern Venice*, «Journal of Early Modern History», 12, 2008, pp. 313-33; J. FERRARO, *The Power to Decide. Battered Wives in Early Modern Venice*, «Renaissance Quarterly», 48, 1995, pp. 492-512: 505.

<sup>6</sup> F. DE VIVO, *Information and Communication in Venice: Rethinking Early Modern Politics*, Oxford 2007.

<sup>7</sup> The Inquisition's involvement with Jews and Judaizers has been examined in PULAN, *The Jews of Europe*; and in P.C. Ioly Zorattini's multivolume edition of *processi* transcripts: *Processi del S. Ufficio di Venezia contro ebrei e giudaizzanti*, 14 vols., Firenze, 1980-99. Both authors employed Inquisition material in constructing biographical accounts of Judaizers.

<sup>8</sup> This interpretation of gossip and rumour is informed by Max Gluckman's classic article, *Gossip and Scandal*, «Current Anthropology», 4, 1963, pp. 307-16. For a recent overview of Gluckman's argument and subsequent criticism, see: P. STEWART, A. STRATHERN, *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors and Gossip*, Cambridge 2004, pp. 29-58.

<sup>9</sup> T. SHIBUTANI, *Improvvised News. A Sociological Study of Rumor*, Indianapolis 1966, pp. 163-84.

departed from the state's official policy. From a wider perspective, this process of identifying deviance and upholding acceptable norms was part of the campaign of social discipline which historians such as Adriano Prosperi and Paolo Prodi have identified with the post-Tridentine period<sup>10</sup>. One important aspect of the process of social discipline is at the level of the micro-politics of everyday life. This can be assessed through small-scale studies. As Wolfgang Reinhard has argued, a microhistorical analysis might be the most fruitful way to examine the post-Tridentine campaign for social discipline at the level of its application<sup>11</sup>.

To this aim, the article uses the testimonies of accusers and witnesses to elucidate the way the suspicion of religious deviance, in particular crypto-Judaism, shaped human relations and the mechanisms developed for curbing heresy in the Venetian parishes and neighbourhoods. The denunciations and testimonies of witnesses constitute the most extensive part of inquisitorial hearings for this time. Although, for obvious reasons, Inquisition studies have mainly dealt with those individuals who fell victim to inquisitorial investigations – for the great majority of the accused, the Inquisition is perhaps the only known record, brief as it may be, of their lives – it is worth noting that the Inquisition represents a unique record of all those persons of different social ranking who appeared as accusers or witnesses. Their words, which the Inquisition's notaries meticulously wrote down and the tribunal preserved in the dossiers of trials, are a valuable source, one that provides some glimpses into the world of Venetian parishes and of neighbours who gradually came to recognise people who did not conform to the norms prescribed by the post-Tridentine Church and the Venetian state; a «Trojan horse», as an anonymous accuser referred to an alleged group of crypto-Jews in 1555<sup>12</sup>. Although shaped by the witnesses' skill in weaving their narrative in the realm of officialdom, the testimonies

<sup>10</sup> A. PROSPERI, *Riforma cattolica, Controriforma, disciplinamento sociale*, in G. DE ROSA, G. TULLIO (edd.), *Storia dell'Italia religiosa*, 2, *L'età moderna*, Roma 1994, pp. 3-48; A. PROSPERI, *Tribunali della coscienza. Inquisitori, confessori, missionari*, Torino 1996.

<sup>11</sup> W. REINHARD, *Disciplinamento sociale, confessionalizzazione, modernizzazione. Un discorso storiografico*, in P. PRODI (ed.), *Disciplina dell'anima, disciplina del corpo e disciplina della società tra medioevo ed età moderna*, Bologna 1994, pp. 101-23.

<sup>12</sup> *Processi del S. Uffizio di Venezia*, 2, p. 74: «La casa sua pare quel cavallo troiano pieno d'insidie».

were polyphonic documents, as were the entire trials<sup>13</sup>. Testimonies filtered, among many things, collective anxieties, neighbourhood gossip, the views of other people who participated in the evidence-gathering process, official and unofficial definitions of deviant behaviour and local practices, and customs.

The value of testimonies does not lie only in their truthfulness and reliability<sup>14</sup>. The testimonies were imbued with cultural values and ideological meaning, and the degree of their reliability does not affect the norms that informed them. The testimonies offer some insight into the «latent possibilities» – in Carlo Ginzburg's words<sup>15</sup> – and the limits that were available to ordinary Venetians for the presentation of the image of the crypto-Jew. More generally, the testimonies drew on a cultural repertoire of social and cultural modes in a situational context; over the years the modes and conventions might have changed, been enriched, abandoned or modified. In this sense, the witnesses' depositions are products and reflections of will, agency and social experience<sup>16</sup>.

The crypto-Judaism on which this article focuses is that of Iberian origin. The Jewish presence in Venice became highly institutionalized in the course of the sixteenth century with the establishment of the Ghetto areas<sup>17</sup>. Thanks to the opportunities for trade it offered, Venice became an attractive destination for Iberian conversos. Those New Christians who returned openly to Judaism and lived in the Ghettos were not generally a concern for the Venetian government, even after Paul IV's

<sup>13</sup> J.J. MARTIN, *Venice's Hidden Enemies. Italian Heretics in a Renaissance City*, Baltimore 2004, p. 14.

<sup>14</sup> For an attempt to reconstruct the religious customs that crypto-Jews strove to observe in Venice, through witnesses' testimonies, see: P.C. IOLY ZORATTINI, *Derekh Teshuvah: La via del ritorno*, in ID. (ed.), *L'identità dissimulata. Giudaizzanti iberici nell'Europa cristiana dell'età moderna*, Firenze 2000, pp. 195-248.

<sup>15</sup> C. GINZBURG, *The Cheese and the Worms. The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, London 1980, p. xxi.

<sup>16</sup> For a similar approach to testimonies and supplications from judicial records of the Venetian Patriarchal Court dealing with marriage disputes: J.M. FERRARO, *Marriage Wars in Late Renaissance Venice*, Oxford-New York 2001, esp. pp. 4-13.

<sup>17</sup> The Jews' settlement and legal position have been thoroughly examined in a series of articles by B. Ravid. For a recent overview, see: B. RAVID, *The Venetian Government and the Jews*, in R.C. DAVIS, B. RAVID (edd.), *The Jews of Early Modern Venice*, Baltimore 2001, pp. 3-30.

new policy represented by the decree of 1556<sup>18</sup>. But the authorities were concerned with those who took the risk to live outside the Ghettos in the guise of Christians but secretly practiced Judaism. Thus, Judaizers outside the Ghetto drew the attention of the Inquisition, whose involvement with Jews and Judaizers took place in the shadow of the tribunal's main preoccupations, that is, until the 1580s, the control of the advance of the Reformation in Venice, and cases involving sorcery and magical practices thereafter<sup>19</sup>. From the Inquisition's caseload, hearings involving Judaizers of Iberian origin represented only a small percentage of the total<sup>20</sup>.

Although *fama* and rumours had been thoroughly examined in treatises on canon and civil law, procedural manuals produced for the tribunals of the Roman Inquisition often included a discussion on rumours and *publica fama* and their value as evidence. In his late sixteenth-century *Praxis iudiciaria inquisitorum*, the first such legal manual produced by an Italian inquisitor, Umberto Locati, who served as inquisitor in Pavia and Piacenza before being appointed *Commisario generale del Sant'Ufficio*, defines *fama* as «some sort of common opinion, manifested verbally, which arises from suspicion»<sup>21</sup>. However, such manuals did not uncritically accept *fama* in initiating proceedings against suspicious persons, which suggests that they recognised risks that lurked in the use of hearsay. In this view, the late fifteenth-century Spanish manual *Repertorium Inquisitorum*, which was critically edited

<sup>18</sup> The change in papal policy and the encounters with the Venetian government are illustrated in B. RAVID, *Venice, Rome and the Reversion of New Christians*, in IOLY ZORATTINI (ed.), *L'identità dissimulata*, pp. 151-93. On papal policy: A. PROSPERI, *L'Inquisizione romana e gli ebrei*, in M. LUZZATI (ed.), *L'Inquisizione e gli ebrei in Italia*, Roma 1994, pp. 67-119.

<sup>19</sup> This shift in inquisitorial proceedings is clearly illustrated in the statistics compiled by J. TEDESCHI, *The Prosecution of Heresy: Collected Studies on the Inquisition in Early Modern Italy*, Binghamton (NY) 1991, p. 105.

<sup>20</sup> P.C. IOLY ZORATTINI, *Jews, Crypto-Jews, and the Inquisition*, in DAVIS, RAVID (edd.), *The Jews of Early Modern Venice*, pp. 97-116.

<sup>21</sup> U. LOCATI, *Praxis iudiciaria inquisitorum*, Venetiis, apud Damianum Zenarium, 1583, p. 106: «Fama est quaedam opinio communis, voce manifestata, ex quadam suspitione proveniens». On Locati, see: S. DITCHFIELD, *Umberto Locati O.P. (1503-1587): Inquisitore, vescovo e storico: profilo bio-bibliografico*, «Bollettino storico piacentino», 84, 1989, pp. 205-21.

by two Italian jurists, Pietro Vendramin and Quintiliano Mandosio, and printed in Venice in 1575 and 1588 under the sponsorship of the papal nuncio Giovanni Battista Castagna, warned that «*fama* is half-full proof [...] which is very risky and is mostly false because [*fama*] may originate from hatred or malevolence and ignorance»<sup>22</sup>. In the same vein, but also arguing from a technical viewpoint, the Cremonese jurist Cesare Carena warned for a diligent treatment of auricular witnesses<sup>23</sup>, whereas, more specifically, Eliseo Masini advised his colleagues that they have to distinguish between the witnesses on the grounds of the evidence they provided. He wrote:

There are two sorts of witnesses, those who have seen the crime or have heard it with their own ears, and others who have heard it said; the former are called eyewitnesses and proper auricular witnesses and the latter indirect auricular witnesses<sup>24</sup>.

In practice it is difficult to establish how successful the guidelines were on the classification of witnesses and the type of evidence they provided. Seldom do Inquisition documents allow us to follow the way inquisitors dealt with evidence. Nevertheless, the 1585 trial against the De Nis family offers a rare insight into the way one inquisitor classified and assessed evidence<sup>25</sup>. A trial document that summarised the evidence offered by witnesses, probably drafted under the inquisitor's guidance, registered the various accusations against the family and dis-

<sup>22</sup> *Repertorium inquisitorum pravitatis haereticae, in quo omnia, quae ad haeresum cognitionem, ac S. Inquisitionis forum pertinent, continentur*, Venetiis, apud Damianum Zenarum, 1588, p. 337: «Fama facit semiplenam probationem [...] probatio est multum periculosa, et plerumque est falsa, quia potest ortum ab inimicis, vel malevolis, et ignorantibus». On the manual, see: TEDESCHI, *The Prosecution of Heresy*, pp. 52-3, 56.

<sup>23</sup> C. CARENA, *Tractatus de officio sanctissimae inquisitionis et modo procedendi in causis fidei*, Cremonae, apud Io. Baptistam Belpierum, 1655, p. 317. On Carena, see: G. CORNAGGIA MEDICI, *Cesare Carena, giurista cremonese del secolo XVII*, «Archivio storico lombardo», s. 6, 57, 1930, pp. 297-330.

<sup>24</sup> MASINI, *Sacro Arsenal*, p. 38: «i testimoni sono di due sorti, alcuni, i quali hanno veduto i delitto, o sentitolo con le proprie orecchie, & altri, che l'hanno udito narrare, i quali communemente si chiamano Testes de visu, & de auditu proprio, & Testes de auditu alieno».

<sup>25</sup> On the case, cf. *infra*.

tinguished between each accusation on the basis that it was hearsay evidence and rumour, or that it was proper knowledge of the witness<sup>26</sup>. It seems that, even before the guidelines were set by their colleague and theorist Masini, inquisitors were aware of how to deal with hearsay evidence, paying attention to its limitations but also seeking to extract the maximum of its potential.

However, as prescriptive texts, the provisions of the procedural manuals should be treated with caution and not taken at face value as reflecting actual legal practice. Thus, it is worth noting that generally inquisitors were not so meticulous in distinguishing between different types of evidence. This is substantiated by Cardinal Desiderio Scaglia's manuscript instruction *Prattica per procedere nelle cause del S. Uffizio*, compiled in the 1630s<sup>27</sup>. In this widely distributed manuscript, which highlighted practical aspects of inquisitorial hearings without engaging in the formalities and the subtleties of canon law common in the printed inquisitorial manuals, no reference was made to *fama* and its potential as a source in inquisitorial investigations<sup>28</sup>. It is plausible to assume that in everyday inquisitorial activity little attention was paid to differences between types of evidence, as suggested in procedural manuals, as long as the evidence was deemed sufficient for launching an inquiry.

## 2. Rumours and perceptions of crypto-Judaism: from ambiguity to crystallisation

An early manifestation of rumours in reports on crypto-Jews came in 1555 from the witness Giulia, a resident of the S. Maria Formosa par-

<sup>26</sup> ASVe, SU, b. 54, proc. «Filippi», «Sumarium contra Iudaizantes».

<sup>27</sup> The copy of the *Prattica* I refer to has been edited by A. MIRTO, *Un inedito del Seicento sull'Inquisizione*, «Nouvelles de la République des Lettres», 1, 1986, pp. 99-138; The editor neither dates the instruction nor identifies its author. The *Prattica* has been convincingly attributed to Scaglia by J. TEDESCHI, *The Prosecution of Heresy*, pp. 212, 230-1. On the significance of the *Prattica*: A. PROSPERI, *L'elemento storico nelle polemiche sulla santità*, in ID., *America e Apocalisse e altri saggi*, Pisa 1999, pp. 321-41.

<sup>28</sup> On the frequent use of the *Prattica* in the Venetian Inquisition: SCHUTTE, *Aspiring Saints*, p. 204. See also a letter of instruction from Rome to the Inquisition of Adria, which bears many similarities (in some points it is exactly the same) with the *Prattica*, found in the archives of the Venetian Inquisition: ASVe, SU, b. 153.



ish. Giving evidence for the investigation into co-parishioners Duarte Gomez and Agostinho Enriches, Giulia reported that it had been said that the accused, who lived above her apartment, were Marranos and many Jews frequented their house. The rumours about the two alleged Marranos were circulating in the neighbourhood and Giulia told the interrogators that they could get more information from a mason and some carpenters who also lived there because «everyone says that they are Marranos»<sup>29</sup>.

Some years later, rumours appeared more prominently in the trial against Gaspar Ribeiro, which started in 1579 and was one of the longest trials involving alleged crypto-Judaism. The case came before the Inquisition after it was revealed that Ribeiro, a Portuguese of Marrano origin who lived as a Christian in Venice, had refused to pay the dowry he had promised to a Jewish woman from the Ghetto, whom Ribeiro's son João had secretly married in 1575<sup>30</sup>. Many witnesses were aware of rumours that portrayed Ribeiro as a bad Christian. In 1580, Matthea de Rippasicca, Ribeiro's housemaid, testified that after she had left her master's home, she had heard it said in S. Giovanni e Paolo church that she had been among Marranos, although she added that she did not know why people were saying that Ribeiro was a Marrano and that she did not know what the word Marrano meant<sup>31</sup>. Marieta, another housemaid of Gaspar Ribeiro, told the Inquisition: «I know nothing but many times I have heard it said that Gaspar was a bad Christian. Wherever

<sup>29</sup> *Processi del S. Uffizio di Venezia*, 1, p. 226: «et se dice che sono marani et ghe pratica in quella casa assai persone et Zudei et femene»; «perché tutti dicono che sono marani».

<sup>30</sup> The case has received much scholarly attention. A biographical account of Gaspar Ribeiro and his family has been meticulously constructed by B. PULLAN, *The Inquisition and the Jews of Venice: The Case of Gaspare Ribeiro, 1580-1581*, «Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library», 62, 1977, pp. 207-31; ID., *The Jews of Europe*, pp. 229-42. Against prevalent generalizations on Marranos' religious identity, Pullan argued that «each member of the Ribeiro family could well be cited in support of a favourite theory about the nature of Marranism»: *ibid.*, p. 240. Similarly, see: P.C. IOLY ZORATTINI, *The Ribeiroos: A Sixteenth Century Family of Conversos between Two Inquisitions: Lisbon and Venice*, in *Inquisição: Ensaio sobre Mentalidade, Heresias e Arte*, São Paulo 1992, pp. 307-17. For a different perspective, see: C.F. BLACK, *Italian Confraternities in the Sixteenth Century*, Cambridge 1989, pp. 268-9.

<sup>31</sup> ASVe, SU, b. 45, proc. «Gaspar Ribeiro», test. 7 April 1580.

I went people told me: “You should not stay there because he is a bad Christian”»<sup>32</sup>. Later, as more witnesses appeared, the circulation of rumours became more evident. Matteo, *nunzio* of the parish’s Sacrament confraternity, where Gaspar Ribeiro had served as *gastaldo*, said: «He was known not by any other name but Marrano»<sup>33</sup>. Similarly, Remego Sopratti, a neighbour from the S. Maria Formosa parish, said: «I have always heard [Gaspar Ribeiro] being called the Marrano»<sup>34</sup>. More resolutely, Giulio Balanzan, a Venetian from S. Barnaba parish, Dorsoduro, stated: «Throughout Venice it was said: Those Marranos have come from Spain»<sup>35</sup>.

In the eyes of those Venetian witnesses the rumours portrayed the Ribeiroos as bad Christians. When rumours referred to the word ‘Marrano’, witnesses appeared unaware to the word’s association with Judaism. It is worth noting that the word ‘Marrano’ was used interchangeably with the word ‘Lutheran’ to denote behaviour non-conformed to Catholic piety. For instance, when the witness Matteo, *nunzio* of the parish confraternity, was asked what he would have thought of a Portuguese who appeared as a Christian but secretly had married his son to a Jewish woman, he replied disarmingly: «I would have thought that he was a wicked person, a Lutheran and even worse»<sup>36</sup>. For most witnesses, anything relating to Judaism existed only within the Ghettos’ walls. In this view, living outside the Ghettos signified adherence to Catholicism and any distinction to be made was between more or less devout Catholics.

However, it was witnesses of Spanish or Portuguese origin, who associated unambiguously the rumours about the Marranism of the Ri-

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, test. 9 June 1580: «io non so altro se non che ho inteso dire che l’era cathivo christiano [...]. Io l’ho inteso dir fuora de casa da più persone in diverse volte ma io non so el nome loro chè dove io son andata sapendo che io stava con el dito Gasparo me dicevano: Non doveresti star lì, chè l’è cathivo christiano».

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, test. 21 November 1580: «non si conosceva per altro nome che per il marano».

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, test. 22 November 1580: «L’ho sempre inteso a chiamar il marano».

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, test. 1 December 1580: «Per tuta Venetia se diceva Quei Marrani de Gasparo et Ioanne Ribiera sono venuti de Spagna».

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, test. 21 November 1580: «Io crederei che ’l fosse un tristo homo luterano et pezo». Similarly, in a case of 1579, the Portuguese Felix da Castello, denouncing his wife Marina dal Castello, or Marina ‘grecha’, told the tribunal that his wife called him Lutheran and Marrano: ASVe, SU, b. 45, proc. «Marina dal Castello».

beiros family with Judaism. As Isabel Lobata from Lisbon, who lived in S. Sofia parish, Cannaregio, testified:

It is certain that the father [Gaspar] and the son [João] fled Portugal for being Jews and were burned in effigy by the Holy Office [...]. I have heard it said many times and by many people, and these are well-known rumours. [...] And if you ask Portuguese people who are true Christians, they will say the same as me [...]. Christians and Jews speak ill of them [the Ribeiros], that they are not Christians and after they die they will go to the paradise below, that is to hell<sup>37</sup>.

In the same vein, the Jew Leo from the Venetian Ghetto identified Marranism with Judaism: «I have heard that people always call Gaspar a Marrano, but I do not know whether he is a good Christian or Jew»<sup>38</sup>.

Despite the elusive nature of rumours, certain groups of people can be discerned as agents and transmitters of rumours within the urban fabric of Venice. Indeed, servants and housekeepers played a role as rumour-mongers. The examples discussed earlier of the housekeepers from the trial against Gaspar Ribeiro highlight the role of servants. The testimony of Caterina, a neighbour of the Ribeiros, plainly demonstrates the relation between housekeepers and the circulation of rumours and gossip:

In their [the Ribeiros'] house have worked many servants and some of them did not stay there for more than a month; some servants were saying that they [Gaspar and João] lived in the Christian manner, but some others were saying that they did not live as Christians and that they ate meat on Fridays and Saturdays, and those servants were saying that they were Marranos<sup>39</sup>.

<sup>37</sup> ASVe, SU, b. 45, proc. «Gaspar Ribeiro», test. 22 June 1581: «Et è cosa certa che il padre et il figliolo erano fuggiti de Portogallo per esser Iudei et brusati in statua del Santo Offitio. [...] L'ho sentito a dir parecchie volte da molte persone et de questo ne è publica voce et fama [...]. Et se domandarete Portoghesi che siano veramente Christiani dirano al medesimo che dico io [...]. Christiani et Iudei dicono mal di loro cioè Ioanne et Gasparo che non erano Christiani et essendo morti sono andati al paradiso di sotto cioè all'inferno».

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, test. 6 December 1580: «Io ho inteso per el vulgo che deto Gaspar sempre se chiamava el marano et io non son informato che lui sia bon christiano o iudeo».

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 97: «In casa de li detti ci sono state più massare et alcune non ci sono state più de un mese, alcune dicevano che facevano vita christiana, alcune disevano di no et

In denunciations and witnesses' testimonies we can also discern groups of individuals that transferred the rumours, thus connecting cases and providing a sort of a cognitive map of the alleged crypto-Jewish presence. Due to Venice's urban geography, by crossing and travelling around the neighbourhoods and parishes of Venice boatmen acted as agents in the promulgation of rumours. In a period when oral exchange was the prominent means of communication, people whose business involved moving from place to place were indispensable for the dissemination of news and rumours<sup>40</sup>. But rumours were not just neutral means of communication as they were shaped by existing cultural norms and anxieties. In Venice in 1570, Baldissero di Valenti, a boatman from the S. Leonardo parish, informed the tribunal that some «Marranos or Jews» lived in a house in S. Maria Nova parish, Cannaregio, some others in a house in the parish of S. Fosca, Cannaregio, and some others in the Frari area. Thanks to his profession, Di Valenti could provide the Inquisition with the exact location of each of the suspicious houses and the names of potential witnesses, including some boatmen, from each parish<sup>41</sup>. Some years later, in 1585, the boatmen at the *traghetto* of S. Geremia, Cannaregio, while discussing the recent arrest of the De Nis family, pointed out that the presence of another alleged crypto-Jewish family named Silva from S. Marcilian also required investigation, further illustrating the role of boatmen as intermediaries in spreading rumours<sup>42</sup>.

Rumours made a prominent reappearance during the investigation into the Portuguese De Nis family in 1585. A few years earlier, the De Nis had reached Venice after having travelled from Portugal to Flanders and then Germany. Before the Inquisition, the head of the family, Felipe De Nis, admitted that in Venice they lived outwardly as Christians but secretly they practiced Judaism<sup>43</sup>. It was the first time that the Inquisition received denunciations and proceeded against a whole household of alleged crypto-Jews. In an early testimony, the tailor Giuseppe Mazor told the Inqui-

che magnavano la carne di venere et di sabbato et queste che dicevano che 'l magnava carne, dicevano che 'l giera marano».

<sup>40</sup> A. Fox, *Rumour, News and Popular Political Opinion in Elizabethan and Early Stuart England*, «The Historical Journal», 40, 1997, pp. 597-620: 602-8.

<sup>41</sup> ASVe, SU, b. 28, proc. «Contra Maranos», denunciation of 10 January 1570.

<sup>42</sup> ASVe, SU, b. 56, proc. «Silva», denunciation of 13 November 1585.

<sup>43</sup> On the case, see: PULLAN, *The Jews of Europe*, pp. 215-7.

sition: «I have heard it said that they [the De Nis] are Marranos and they never go to Mass»<sup>44</sup>. Some days later, Antonio Bertolini, the parish priest of S. Leonardo, reported the following rumours about the suspect family:

I have heard it said that they are and live as Marranos and they go to the Ghetto, to the Jewish synagogue; I have heard that on Friday they prepare supper for Saturday; I have also heard that they do not keep images of either Christ, the Virgin or the saints in their house.

Bertolini's testimony illustrates the emergence, circulation and function of rumours in the parish and the network of gossipmongers and agents. The parish priest informed the Inquisition that the pieces of information had been furnished to him by a woman called Domenica, the wife of the boatman Zuane, and the widow Cecilia, who both frequented the De Nis house as part-time servants. Although Bertolini was not aware of the family's suspicious behaviour, the reception of rumours alarmed him and made him more vigilant; he testified that due to the rumours he had noticed that the suspicious persons had never gone to church. Finally, he added his own version of how the suspicious persons might have behaved: «and I suspect that I have never seen them associate with Christians»<sup>45</sup>.

Cecilia's testimony similarly highlights how rumours made their recipients more alert and moved them to scrutinise suspicious behaviour; she reported:

because I have heard it said that they were Marranos, I had in mind to pay attention when the bells sounded for the Angelus; and I have noticed that they never genuflected, took off their hats, or recited the Hail Mary. And I have noticed this many times<sup>46</sup>.

<sup>44</sup> ASVe, SU, b. 54, proc. «Filippi», test. 28 September 1585: «et ho inteso rezonare che questi son Marani et che non vano alla messa».

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, test. 1 October 1585: «Et ho inteso dire che sono et vivono da Marani et che vano in gheto alla sinagoga de li Hebrei et ho inteso ancora che i parechiano el venire per il sabbato. Io ho ancora inteso che i non ha figure né di Christo né de la Madona né dei santi in casa»; «e in soma è una gran cosa che mai gli ho visti in chiesa et ho dato fantasia che mai gli ho visti praticar con Christiani».

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, test. 3 October 1585: «perché io haveva inteso dir che erano Marani dava a

Cecilia was herself a recipient of earlier gossip about the De Nis family from a former servant, a young man from Udine. In the network of gossip Cecilia operated both as a gossipmonger and transmitter. She received gossip from the young servant and others; subsequently she adopted a more active stance: she sought to confirm the rumours and to refine them. Later she passed the rumours on to the parish priest.

Other neighbours, apart from those who appeared before the Inquisition, were apparently aware of the rumours in circulation. As Cecilia reported: «Those in the neighbourhood think that the family do not observe the good law because they never go to Mass»<sup>47</sup>. Similarly, another witness, Domenica, said: «and the whole neighbourhood says that in their [the De Nis] house there is no image of any sort». At the time that the accusations against the De Nis were brought before the Inquisition, the rumours about the family's suspicious conduct had already crystallised into a specific understanding among witnesses who identified Marranism with Judaism. This is substantiated by Domenica's testimony. She reported that the family never gave alms or fire to the neighbours on Friday and Saturday. Asked why the family did not do so, Domenica replied roundly: «How should I know? People are saying that they live as Jews»<sup>48</sup>.

A consideration of the circulation of rumours and gossip in the Gaspar Ribeiro and the De Nis family cases allows us to assess the changing patterns of crypto-Jewish perceptions in those few years that separated the two trials. By 1581, when the Inquisition had stopped calling witnesses to give evidence against Ribeiro, a pattern in the rumours about the defendant has emerged. The rumours that portrayed Ribeiro as a Marrano circulated in S. Maria Formosa parish, the Ribeiros' place of residence, but also outside it, in other areas of Venice, such as the Rialto, where the Ribeiros did business, or in places where people who knew the Ribeiros lived. This wide circulation of rumours about the Ribeiros might have been caused by the fact that the family had lived in two other parishes

mente quando sonava l'Ave Maria né mai ghe ho visto né inzenochiarse né cavarse la beretta né dir l'Ave Maria. Et a questo ci ho advertito più volte».

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*: «Et quelli de la contrada non hano questi Philippi che siano de bona Legge perché non vano mai a messa».

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, test. 3 October 1585: «per la contrada se dice che in casa loro non ci è imagine de sorte nissuna»; «Che sogio mi? Le persone dicono che devono far la vitta hebrea».

before moving to S. Maria Formosa parish. Although they circulated widely, the rumours surfaced only when the Inquisition started interrogating witnesses in relation to them. By that time, rumours remained dormant or of secondary importance for those who were aware of them. This might have also resulted from that the rumours about Ribeiro referred to him as a negligent Christian and not as a crypto-Jew.

In the De Nis case, in contrast, the diffusion of rumours was almost exclusively structured around the parish of S. Leonardo and they hardly spread outside it. Rumours had become a matter of locality. In these rumours, Marranism unambiguously referred to crypto-Judaism. Due to this explicit reference, the rumours encouraged neighbours to adopt an openly hostile attitude towards members of the suspect family, as the witness Cecilia reported: «Those in the neighbourhood think that the family do not observe the good law because they never go to Mass; and every time the servant of the family goes to fetch water, they [neighbours] call out to him: “Hey, Jew!”»<sup>49</sup>. In her turn, the witness Domenica reported another incident: when some neighbours saw the family’s servant at the time the Angelus was rung, they asked him to cross himself and recite the Hail Mary, to which he responded: «What cross? I don’t understand». Domenica concluded: «So, the servant did not want to cross himself or to say the Hail Mary because, according to what I have heard, the family are Jews who became Christians»<sup>50</sup>. The emergence and diffusion of rumours about the De Nis led to a process of gradual exclusion; Bertolini, the parish priest, told the Inquisition that he had warned the two women who had informed him about the family and spread the rumours to stop frequenting the De Nis’ home<sup>51</sup>. It has been suggested that after the mid-1560s, Venice’s lower classes had grown less tolerant<sup>52</sup>. In this view, in the few years that separated the Ribeiro and De Nis trials, this trend developed further; rumours

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, test. 3 October 1585: «Et quelli de la contrada non hano questi Philippi che siano da bona Legge perché non vano mai a messa e el servitor che hano in casa quando che ’l vien a trazer dell’aqua li dicono Ha, hebreo».

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, test. 3 October 1585: «Che croce? Dicendo Io non intendo. Et cosi non se voleva far el segno de la croce né dirla et per quanto ho inteso a dir i sé Hebrei fatti Cristiani».

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, test. 1 October 1585: «alli quale io gli ho proibito che non ci praticano».

<sup>52</sup> MARTIN, *Venice’s Hidden Enemies*, p. 194.

shifted from ambiguity to what sociologists term a common definition, that is a common understanding<sup>53</sup>.

Finally, while in the Ribeiro case the rumours were horizontally scattered throughout different areas of Venice, in the De Nis case, the diffusion of rumours developed hierarchically before reaching the Inquisition's ears. Rumours emerged among the ordinary people of S. Leonardo parish. As anxiety intensified, in an act of legitimisation parishioners passed the rumours on to the parish priest, who represented the appropriate authority in matters of heretical misconduct. Eventually, it was the parish priest who undertook to assess, summarise and report the rumours, the people's opinion, to the supreme authority, the Inquisition. Before the tribunal, the parish priest was eager to demonstrate that he had fulfilled his duty by keeping under surveillance his parishioners' religious conduct. He explained: «In my parish stay the Philippi [*i.e.* De Nis] [...] they have lived in my parish for two years or less, enough for them to have been there for two Easters, and I have never seen them in church»<sup>54</sup>.

### 3. *Social discipline at the grassroots*

Compared to earlier hearings and trials, the exclusively parish-based trial against the De Nis family exemplified the significant role of the parochial system envisaged by Catholic reformers in the Council of Trent more than thirty years earlier<sup>55</sup>. In this view, we get insights into the process of social discipline by focusing on the grassroots, the notion of parochial life being a promising line for analysis. In the late sixteenth century in Venice, parishes certainly became more significant in everyday social life. As regards the authorities, both church and the state, the role of parishes was reinforced by measures such as recording the *status animarum* (the collection of data on people within the parish boundaries), the definition of parish boundaries according to the

<sup>53</sup> SHIBUTANI, *Improvised News*, pp. 14-6.

<sup>54</sup> ASVe, SU, b. 54, proc. «Filippi», test. 1 October 1585: «In nella mia parochia habitano li Philippi [...] quali hano habitado nella mia parochia per el spacio de doi anni o mancho basta che ci sono stati doi Pasque et io non li ho veduti mai in chiesa».

<sup>55</sup> C.F. BLACK, *Early Modern Italy. A Social History*, London 2001, pp. 167-87: 167-9.



Tridentine decree<sup>56</sup>, and the selection of a parish chief to function as an administrative unit for the government and the Church. There was also the obvious increase in parish-based eucharistic confraternities, which superseded supra-parochial foundations<sup>57</sup>. Besides, Venetians regularly identified themselves and others by their parishes when appearing before tribunals, the Inquisition being a typical example.

Although parishes were more significant now that they bore official recognition, they were among other small-scale urban localities such as neighbourhoods, courtyards, etc., that gradually obtained importance and became meaningful and cohesive units for their inhabitants. We need, therefore, a more nuanced understanding of official definitions of parochial life and contemporaries' perceptions of terms such as *parochia*, *contra* and *contrada*<sup>58</sup>. Small-scale urban localities became the sites where conformity was zealously inspected. At this level, the campaign for social discipline fostered a more complex understanding of religious conformity. As the testimonies against the De Nis family demonstrate, the family failed both to conform to officially prescribed standards of piety, such regular attendance at Mass and the making and taking of confession and communion, and to unofficial ones, such as reciting the Hail Mary and taking off their hats when passing churches. These unofficial signs of piety in public extended sacrality outside the church into neighbourhoods, parishes and piazzas, and contributed to a ritualisation of everyday life that reinforced conformity<sup>59</sup>.

<sup>56</sup> *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, trans. H.J. Schroeder, Rockford (Ill.) 1978, ch. 13, pp. 203-4.

<sup>57</sup> R. MACKENNEY, *Devotional Confraternities in Renaissance Venice*, in W.J. SHEILS, D. WOOD (edd.), *Voluntary Religion*, Oxford 1986, p. 90; R. MACKENNEY, *The Scuole Piccole of Venice: Formations and Transformations*, in N. TERPSTRA (ed.), *The Politics of Ritual Kinship. Confraternities and Social Order in Early Modern Italy*, Cambridge-New York 2000, p. 179.

<sup>58</sup> D. ROMANO, *Patricians and Popolani. The Social Foundations of the Venetian Renaissance State*, Baltimore-London 1987, pp. 141-58; many of the questions relating to Venetian parishes and neighbourhoods, though for an earlier period, are highlighted in J. WHEELER, *Neighbourhoods and Local Loyalties in Renaissance Venice*, in A. COWAN (ed.), *Mediterranean Urban Culture 1400-1700*, Exeter 2000, pp. 31-42.

<sup>59</sup> On this theatricality of daily social life, see: E. MUIR, *The Virgin on the Street Corner. The Place of the Sacred in Italian Cities*, in J.J. MARTIN (ed.), *The Renaissance. Italy and Abroad*, London-New York 2003, pp. 279-96.

The different circulation of rumours in the two trials illustrates wider developments in inquisitorial activity and perceptions of misbehaviour in sixteenth-century Venice. Both trials reached the Inquisition in the 1580s, when the patterns of heretical activity in the city began to change as cases of witchcraft and magical practices prevailed over 'Lutheranism', which had dominated the court's work over the previous thirty years. Although statistically this shift is well-documented, the underlying reasons for it are less clear. Even from its initial stages, the various manifestations of the Reformation inevitably had a public face. Those attracted by the Reformation propagated their ideas and beliefs, seeking to win over supporters. Apart from evangelical preachers who used the pulpit, places of public activity such as workshops, shops, inns and taverns became centres for the discussion and dissemination of Reformation ideas<sup>60</sup>. As oppression grew harsher, the members of the Venetian evangelical community who remained in the city turned to dissimulation, outwardly conforming to Catholicism<sup>61</sup>. Thus, the public face of 'Lutheranism' gradually waned. On the other hand, the emergence of cases involving magical arts and superstition is clearly related with the environment of parishes and neighbourhoods. As it has been noted, the 'typical' Venetian *strega* was a woman who stood out from her neighbours<sup>62</sup>. Therefore, in this view, the parish-based trial against the De Nis family for crypto-Judaism, although a minor crime from a statistical viewpoint, illustrates this emerging new trend of parish and neighbourhood-based perceptions of misconduct. The 'concrete' nature of rumours about the De Nis and their role in the investigation turned anxiety into public discourse and marked a gradual transformation of what Bob Scribner has defined as «the unofficial public opinion of the street» to «the sectional public opinion» which was officially conditioned and complied with the authorities' interests<sup>63</sup>.

<sup>60</sup> MARTIN, *Venice's Hidden Enemies*, pp. 87, 89, 90, 210-4, 227; S. SEIDEL MENCHI, *Inquisizione come repressione o inquisizione come mediazione? Una proposta di periodizzazione*, «Annuario dell'istituto storico italiano per l'età moderna e contemporanea», 35-6, 1983-84, pp. 53-77: 56-61.

<sup>61</sup> MARTIN, *Venice's Hidden Enemies*, pp. 125-8.

<sup>62</sup> R. MARTIN, *Witchcraft and the Inquisition in Venice 1550-1650*, Oxford 1989, pp. 236-8, 243.

<sup>63</sup> B. SCRIBNER, *Heterodoxy, Literacy and Print in the Early German Reformation*, in P. BILLER, A. HUDSON (edd.), *Heresy and Literacy, 1000-1530*, Cambridge 1996, p. 262.

The changing pattern in the perception of crypto-Judaism brings to the fore a more nuanced understanding of the process of social discipline after the Council of Trent. The Inquisition spearheaded and channelled the disciplinary initiatives and vision of the authorities. But at the same time a more reciprocal relation between the institution and ordinary people was under way<sup>64</sup>. The exercise of power and discipline through the Inquisition and the process of othering revealed the agency of ordinary people as dominant actors beyond the authorities' disciplinary initiatives. The Inquisition, by representing authority, edified and directed the public's attention to certain offences and, in turn, witnesses shaped the Inquisition's investigations through their accusations and depositions.

<sup>64</sup> This trend is illustrated in S.K. COHN, *Women and the Counter Reformation in Siena: Authority and Property in the Family*, in ID., *Women in the Streets. Essays on Sex and Power in Renaissance Italy*, Baltimore 1996, pp. 57-75.



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