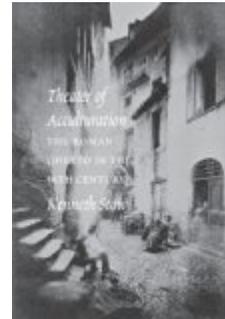


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kenneth Stow. *Theater of Acculturation: The Roman Ghetto in the Sixteenth Century.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001. 272 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-295-98022-5; \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-295-98025-6.

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This compact book provides the reader with a general overview of Rome's Jewish ghetto, especially in the years just leading up to its establishment, in 1555, and the decades immediately after. The primary sources that Stow uses for this study are for the most part the Jewish notarial documents, held in Rome's Capitoline Archive under the rubric of the *Notai ebrei* and running with a certain density into the years after 1600, although not actually abolished by the papal vicariate until around 1640.

Theater of Acculturation is based on a series of three lectures that Stow gave as the Ruth and Clarence Kennedy Professor of Renaissance Studies at Smith College, in late 1996. He has further enhanced the three lectures with an extensive introductory forward and a brief afterword. The chapters deal with the Roman Jews and their Ghetto from three different approaches, although Stow allows his topics a good deal of overlap throughout the book, perhaps reflecting the original lecture format of the work.

Stow uses his first chapter, "The Jew in a Traumatized Society," largely to provide background for the Ghetto's creation, through Paul IV's 1555 bull, *Cum nimis absurdum*, as well as some descriptive material on the physical Ghetto (for which he provides some very useful illustrations and maps). Only in chapter 2, "What Is in a Name?" does Stow really begin to make use of his primary source materials—the hundreds of agreements and arbitrations held in the *Notai ebrei*. His main interest in so doing in this chapter is to provide some archival support for his assertions on the position of Jewish women, the relative independence they enjoyed, in the family and in the Jewish community as a whole, during this period.

In the final chapter of the book, "Social Reconcilia-

tion, from within and without," Stow avails himself of a few more of these notarial agreements, primarily to demonstrate the ways in which arbitration worked in the Ghetto as an alternative to the formal justice that would have otherwise been imposed from without, by the papal Vicar. The afterword takes the story past the abolition (by one such Vicar) of the arbitration process, around 1640, and makes some suggestions about how and why Ghetto society fell into a kind of stasis, almost a deep freeze, that lasted practically until its abolition in the 1840s.

Theater of Acculturation will prove useful for anyone seeking a brief, if not exactly concise, overview of Rome's Jewish Ghetto. It also reveals some of the disadvantages of publishing a lecture series as a monograph. Stow has heaped on the endnotes to the point where they begin to prove more of a burden than an aid to the reader. Perhaps he did so in an attempt to thicken without greatly altering his original spoken narrative, but when the amount of notes in a work amount to well over half the size of the text itself, it is time for the author (or his editors?) to take some of the assertions and examples buried in the notes and make them more accessible up front.

In fact, one soon notices that the material of *Notai ebrei*, which Stow asserts form the archival core of his source material, and which he has used extensively in his earlier, larger studies on the Roman Jews, are employed very sparingly in the text of this work. The reader who is not willing to constantly turn to the back of the book is left with very little flavor of what it was actually like to live in the Ghetto in the crucial years after its foundation. Only in his third chapter (lecture) does

Stow really begin to explore what was apparently the real topic of this work: what the notarial language of these documents can reveal about Jewish attitudes and means of self-presentation. Yet, without a comparative analysis of Christian notarial materials (in particular, of examples from the Ghetto after the 1640s, when the job was turned over to Christian notaries), it is difficult to see what the language, and especially the reticence, says about a specifically Jewish mode of social comportment.

Ironically, the many supporting or contrasting examples that Stow does offer, culled from his wide bibliography of early-modern Jewish studies throughout Italy and

Europe (especially Germany, though this hardly shows up in the index), tend more to blur his narrative line than to bolster it. There are moments when the reader might gladly forego what are essentially digressions into the larger Jewish historiography, much of which seems only peripherally related to that of the Roman Ghetto. Certainly in such a short work, it could be more useful to keep the focus better fixed on the topic at hand—the Roman Jews—in the hope that one might go away from the work with a better idea of what the people who occupied this unique community for almost three centuries were actually like.

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