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Jewish Baths of Siracusa

Constructions of Jewish History

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Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both.

– C. Wright Mills

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To my family and friends,
for their unequivocal and constant support.

To my teacher,
for her relentless encouragements and trust.

To my grandmother,
for teaching me by example and for enabling me to pursue my goals.

Abstract

The oldest and largest mikveh in Europe was discovered, just a few decades ago on Ortygia, in Syracuse, Sicily, ten meters under the Hotel alla Giudecca. The "Casa Bianca" mikveh was most likely built during the Byzantine period and was probably in use from the 7th to the 15th century. Its five immersion pools were entombed and apparently erased from the records, after the Jews, in 1492, were forced to either leave or convert. This case study explores the different historical constructs that have evolved around this monument in recent years. Based on the assumption that the success of a narrative depends on engagement and the ability to connect with the story being told, a mixed methods approach, combining a qualitative literary analysis of several media materials and a diary to field data observations, was used. An ethnographic analysis, based on primary data collected during a two weeks field research in Syracuse, was combined to the literary analysis conducted of the mikveh owner's diary, as well as three mediated Jewish articles, in order to trace and remark upon the politics of representation currently active in the area as well as develop a better understanding of the role this monument holds in sparking the individual and collective imagination. The explored narratives exposed the Casa Bianca mikveh as a trigger for memories of the past, formative of emotional thought. Additionally, the conclusion establishes the monument as a testimony of material culture selected and patiently restored to create and corroborate Amalia Daniele's vision. Above all, this mikveh is determined to be an emblem of Jewish past, present and future in Ortygia.

Abbreviations

ICOMOS International Council on Monuments and Sites

UNESCO United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

MIKVAH (Alternately miqwah; feminine; mikveh/miqweh, masculine; mikvot, miqwoth; plural); Word with various spellings derived from the Hebrew verb to gather or assemble - designating a collection of water.

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1. General Introduction

1.1. Introduction

It may not be acknowledged very often, but nowadays we are used to this visible presence of the past we can witness around us. People walk along the same roads and paths that centuries worth of their ancestor have walked before them. This is our relationship to the past. We preserve it, and we glorify it, we sell it, we exist amongst it. It belongs to us and yet it does not. What kind of relationships do material remnants of the past share with people today?

Historically, we notice that changes, especially political and religious changes in societies, often caused some facets of traditions and culture to be metaphorically or actually buried and later on forgotten. Jewish people have probably experienced more exiles, deportations, migrations, dispersions than any other ethnico-religious group in the world. At times circumlocutorily and at times not, they have been driven from what they have, for a very long period of time, considered their homeland, Israel. It is because of this fact that we find, to this day, ancient Jewish monuments scattered around Europe, monuments such as mikva'ot. The oldest and largest of these remnants of the past was discovered, just a few decades ago, in 1987. On Ortygia, in Syracuse, Sicily, 10 meters under the Hotel alla Giudecca, can be found the oldest mikveh in Europe. In its general understanding, a mikveh is a Jewish purification bath purposefully used to attain ritual purity through immersion in pure water.¹ The "Casa Bianca" mikveh was most likely built during the Byzantine period and was probably in use from the 7th to the 15th century. Its five immersion pools were entombed and apparently erased from the records, after the Jews, in 1492, were once again forced to find a new home or convert to Catholicism.

When I visited this monument, I was captivated by the inconsistencies between the various narrative frameworks supplied by the different actors on the scene; its representations, stories, exclusions, hints and closeness. I do not wish to investigate my own perception of this site inordinately but instead, explore what has become a tourist attraction from the perspective of storytelling and question what narratives have been constructed around and been produced

¹ This concept will be thoroughly discussed further on. For now, we will continue with the knowledge that purification rituals through immersion expunge the individual of most impurities. This conceptualize's these structures as even more important than synagogues.

through this heritage site. This case study will attempt to explore the different historical constructs that have evolved around this monument in recent years.

Inspired by cultural memory and heritage studies, this paper will review two main historical narratives pertaining to the Jews of Syracuse. First, by conducting a literary analysis of the diary published by the owner of the hotel under which reside our famous baths. Second, by exploring the mediated representation, possibly self-representation, of the contemporary Sicilian Jews and discuss their employment of the monument to promote a particular image or message. Throughout these discussions, I will also share data I, myself, have collected in my anthropological terrain conducted last November in Ortygia.

In all respects, this thesis will examine how Jewish presence is staged and how Jewish heritage is enacted via these various portrayals. The results should eventually enlighten us as to what meaning this ancient monument carries today. The objective will not be to pass judgement on the various historical constructs that have developed around the Jewish baths of Syracuse. Questions of authenticity will not help us to understand this phenomenon better. The goal will be to examine how they distinguish themselves from each other, as well as to explore how they were assembled and implemented. Additionally, the aim will be to demonstrate how these different historical Jewish constructs preserve, glorify, sell, as well as exist amongst the physical remnants of the past.

Previous studies on similar subjects have not adequately explored the material component of heritage in relation to the relationships that exist between things, people and their environment. How heritage is explained and understood has changed within the last few decades. This case study will attempt to outline the constructions of Jewish past circulating around the Casa Bianca mikveh while considering the interlinked notions that influence its discourse.

1.2. Literature Review: A digest of scholarly opinion

My project concerns itself with the contemporary use of the Casa Bianca mikveh as a heritage site. To my knowledge, no research has been conducted on this particular topic as of yet. Most of the research with similar focus has been done on the medieval structures, both material and

social, surrounding European Jewish life in the Middle Ages. As a main focus, the Jewish baths of Syracuse, are to be considered, in the academic world at least, a rather new discovery. Scholars who have incorporated this monument into their research are usually specialist of medieval Jewish life in Europe. One of the most extensive studies conducted on these particular baths was published by Angela Scandaliato and Nuccio Mulè in 2002. It consists of a summary encompassing over fifteen years of research that presents a clear and updated report of the archeological, historical and urban context of the Jewish Quarter of medieval Syracuse. Its focus is not completely devoted to the mikveh but rather to the overall framework of the Jewish Quarter, especially regarding its connections to the nearby churches of St. Philip the Apostle and St. John the Baptist.

Mulè and Scandaliato argue against a previous hypothesis, pressed by Capodiceci, De Benedictis and Privitera, that the Church of St. Philip was the synagogue of the Jewish community of Syracuse prior the eviction edict. The existence of suggestive elements, such as the stone spiral staircase, the subterranean well and the church's location on the border of the Giudecca, most likely contributed to the assumption that St. Philip was the ancient synagogue. However, evidence brought forth by notary documents dating from the 15th century, as well as the discovery of two Jewish inscriptions in the current church of St. John the Baptist confirm its Jewish identity. Furthermore, Mulè and Scandaliato corroborate the theory that the Church of St. Philip has always existed in that same location. According to a Greek inscription found on a tombstone, translated into Latin by priest Anguillara in the 15th century; the church of St. Philip, previously referred to under another name until 1474, was the third paleo-Christian church to be built in the area, in 371AD. Owing to the fact that it is now impossible for this particular hypogeum to be considered a Jewish ritual bath, Mulè and Scandaliato reinterpret the well as a primitive baptismal font, agreeing with the conclusions of Cavallari and Holm. To them, this makes a lot of sense, ancient baptismal fonts share many of the same characteristic as Jewish baths. It would certainly explain why the well located under the contemporary church of St. Philip was mistaken for one. They conclude that from the early days of christianity, this particular subterranean hollow was a hidden baptistry, originally constructed away from prying pagan gaze (Mulè- Scandaliato, 2015).

Based solely on archaeological markers, a few criteria help identify Jewish bathing structures. However, it is mainly the presence of steps that signal the cast of a miqveh; though

this distinction is not pointedly discussed in Rabbinic tradition. Under these circumstances, Jonathan Lawrence outlines potential inconsistencies. Using non-halakhic paradigms to determine whether a potential structure is or is not a miqveh is rather controversial (Lawrence, 2006). For a collection of water to be considered a miqveh, it must conform to all the prescriptions, found within the Mishnah, that condition its admissibility for purification rituals. On the other hand, it would be equally contentious for experts to dismiss certain structures based on standards found within textual sources that may not have been in circulation at the time these infrastructures were erected (Lawrence, 2006). Fortunately, in this situation, this does not appear to be the case. Mulè and Scandaliato's deductions do not engage in either of those seemingly inadequate channels when it comes to figuring out the true nature of the subterranean well under the church of St. Philip. Indeed, Mulè and Scandaliato support all their findings via a wide selection of evidence ranging from archeological data to recovered historical documents, surveys and testimonies dating back to the period under scrutiny and before. However, it would appear an element is missing from their analysis of the hypogeum beneath the current church of St. Philip on Ortygia; a Jewish epigraph. Indeed, a partial Hebrew inscription, carved into the wall along the spiral staircase descending to the basin, which I discovered during my field research, is never mentioned.² Since a full archaeological-architectural investigation of the complex was never attempted, further research in the area could be beneficial to provide the answer to this question.

Before we continue, it seems important to mention that, undeniably, many specialists believe steps to be the crucial distinction between regular water configurations³ and miqva'ot. Lawrence points out that although it is possible to find steps within sizeable structures intended for water storage, these steps are usually thinner, meant to ease access, but not for full body immersion. Deep and larger steps would alter volume capacity and be a waste of effort. Logically, he remarks that a variety of pools with steps could be a miqveh but it would be nonsensical for a structure without steps to be considered a miqveh (Lawrence, 2006). While it is obvious that miqva'ot share a number of physical attributes, such as being plastered, carved in the bed rock, rectangular in shape and stepped, variations occur (Lawrence, 2006).

² The first three letters read אִשֶׁר. This may be interpreted as the name "Asher." The fourth, fifth and sixth letters are unclear. The fourth may be a Heth, the fifth a Pe and the last one might be a Yodh or a final Nun.

³ Wells, swimming pools, bathtubs, bath houses, cisterns, etc.

In contrast to the prominent public bath complex, Jewish ritual baths are scarcely recorded by Christian records in medieval Spain.⁴ When they are, Olivia Remie Constable informs us, the cold water temperature is often mentioned to clarify the distinct nature of the structure as a miqveh (Constable, 2014). This would suggest that water temperature is another recognizable characteristic of Jewish ritual baths. Constable reveals that in comparison to a bath house, a miqveh did not necessitate several rooms with different temperatures. Since the water was meant to be cold and natural, a miqveh only required one deep immersion pool (Constable, 2014). While Scandaliato also attests to prevailing archaeological evidence suggesting miqva'ot were typically erected below ground level, it would seem that, unlike Constable, she does not consider water temperature to be a standard indicator of such structures. In fact, she identifies, within the Casa Bianca mikveh, an arrangement possibly intended for the addition of hot water which would raise the temperature of the ground water, which according to her, was an authorized procedure (Scandaliato, 2011).

About the Casa Bianca miqveh, Mulè and Scandaliato discuss several theories. One of these ideas is based upon the architectural contrast they observe amongst its five immersion pools. They hypothesize that the two lateral baths were additions completed sometime in the Middle Ages. The quadrangular pillars supporting a barrel vaulted ceiling and clover shapes found in the main chamber correspond to a traditional style used by the Romans and the Byzantines (Mulè- Scandaliato, 2015). The two lateral baths do not appear to have been carved applying the same refined techniques used by the craftsmen responsible for the main chamber of the hypogeum. The lack of aesthetic and the irregular cuts, not found elsewhere, would indicate these baths were later additions erected by inexperienced workers (Mulè- Scandaliato, 2015). The need for these later additions could be linked to a population growth but more likely for reasons of privacy; a solution to the problem of voyeurism circulating at the time (Mulè- Scandaliato, 2015).

As a matter of fact, the rising degree of fascination awarded to bathing was not a phenomenon restricted to Sicily. These were enduring worries throughout medieval times in Iberia, where public bath houses were endorsed by Christians, Muslims and Jews alike on the

⁴ The practice of bathing, in medieval Spain, especially female bathing, has been thoroughly studied in aspects of shifting narratives. As a model of comparison, Spain is especially relevant to the study of Sicilian socio-cultural context in the late Middle-Ages, same rulers and Inquisition.

grounds of health and hygiene, relaxation and socialization (Constable, 2014). The concerns surrounding male voyeurs opposite female bathers is made evident by documented measures taken to enforce gender separation in bathing complexes and discipline scopophiliacs (Constable, 2014). However, later medieval sources reveal shifting attitudes towards bath houses. Constable explains that while earlier legislation was intended to protect the bathers, later sources viewed bath houses as depraved, diseased and sexually promiscuous, and were therefore attempts at impeding the common practice (Constable, 2014). While some forms of bathing within ethnic groups had always been strictly separate and regulated for religious ritual purposes, this new outlook on bathing attracted more attention towards Jewish and Muslim activities. Specifically, the male gaze of the Spanish Inquisition of the late 15th century settled on facets of non-Christian female routine. Inquisitors payed special attention to all new converts suspected of still practicing the wrong faith, and in particular to miqveh visits (Constable, 2014). Jewish ritual baths distinguish themselves from other bathing practices and structures through religion and gender. Constable, Mulè and Scandaliato expose the dynamics of persecution associated to Jewish practices of bodily cleanliness in late medieval times.

Another theory presented by Mulè and Scandaliato covers the unknown architects of the ancient Casa Bianca hypogeum. Possibly purposefully tunnelled from the beginning, the archaic baths fluid design suggest that its construction was not left to fancy (Mulè-Scandaliato, 2015). As previously mentioned, the discernible declining level of expertise labeled the two separate baths as later additions to the complex. The masterful techniques expressed in the main chamber could be associated to the endeavours of skilled workers, present in the area since the Greek period. However, Mulè and Scandaliato also bring forth the likelihood that the hypogeum is the product of Jewish workers from the East (Mulè-Scandaliato, 2015). They admit that their hypothesis has yet to be confirmed but they present it regardless based upon their original stance that the Jews of Syracuse had relocated from Akradina to Ortygia during the 7th century. At that time, many Jewish communities originating from Syria-Palestine migrated to the city. This suggests that the aesthetic Byzantine influence would first have been encountered in the Middle-East and later followed the Jewish migrations to Syracuse (Mulè- Scandaliato, 2015).

Overall, the historical situation delineated in the work of Mulè and Scandaliato unveils the destructive years that followed the expulsion of the Jews from Sicily. The data shared by the scholars, specifically that which concerns the immediate consecration and repurposing of the synagogue, as well as the alteration of all Jewish Street names in the city, indicates a design to erase all Jewish presence from Syracuse in the years following the edict. Yet, the paradox they unravelled also brings them to conclude that the collective memory of the city remembered a synagogue, it also remembered an underground pool of water, they simply did not remember where (Mulè- Scandaliato, 2015).

Questions concerning memory, heritage, culture and history are not novelties elsewhere. In Europe especially, where one can encounter history around almost every corner. However, within the context of Jewish Sicily, these inquiries are rather new. In the field of anthropology, some studies have targeted the subject of memory in relations to its present-day configuration and reconfiguration (Macdonald, 2013). One of the leading themes in heritage studies concerns politics of representation.⁵ The spreading amount of places and objects being singled out, filed, protected and displayed as heritage has led to a ‘heritagisation’ of society. The cultural landscape of the world has been transformed by the surfacing and accumulation of material memory within our present (Harrison, 2012). Rodney Harrison regards the concept of heritage as a modern concern. Only recently, in modern times, have we started to worry about what is new and what is old and the risks associated to its aging. This he links to the precept of preservation which is partly accountable for the way we weight heritage today (Harrison, 2012). Harrison believes it is this sensibility, with the help of shifting demographic and economic factors, the market development of heritage experience, the rise of international leisure travelling, as well as the propagation of the World Heritage concept, and more, that generated the affluence of recognized heritage world-wide (Harrison, 2012). Within heritage studies, materiality has been understudied and Harrison advocates for a balanced approach combining both discursive and material considerations. He also preaches that heritage is an active process that is produced through the relationship between past and present and therefore a consideration of the future (Harrison, 2012).

⁵ The original widespread engagement towards issues of representation impacted our vision of the ‘Other’ and explored the consequences of some constructions, in colonial contexts, for example. This new focus was mostly influenced by the critic made of the role played by scholar expertise in cases of knowledge production associated to colonial policies and practices. (Harrison, 2012, p.108)

Sharon Macdonald, in a similar fashion, explores several forms of historical consciousness and past configurations. The way things are remembered are not necessarily the way things were. Regardless, recounted memories play an essential role in the production of meaning (Macdonald, 2013). She recognizes the fact that renditions of the past are always selective. Yet, new inventions of traditions or pasts are no less meaningful than previous ones (Macdonald, 2013). She also posits that identity-building is often measured through the development of a rival ‘Other’ (Macdonald, 2013). In this mind set, the study of local memories does not only expose dissimilar recollections of the past but also bares other ways of mentally visualizing the essence of history and temporality (Macdonald, 2013).

Most of the research that has been done concerning the Jews of Sicily, their history, material culture and more, has been conducted and published in Italian. This, in addition to the fact that only a small percentage of these studies have been translated, unfortunately reduces the amount of information available to the academic world and, consequently, to this thesis.⁶ However, investigations conducted on the narrative frameworks built around and produced through heritage sites can be found elsewhere. For example, Fairchild Ruggles researched major monuments in connexion to national narratives. She posits that the Great Mosque of Cordoba can be explained via its architectural story (Ruggles, 2010). In Spain, representations of medieval past are never impartial. The straightforward architectural narrative told by the building, the greatest Islamic symbol remaining in Iberia, synthesizes the Mosque as a reminder of lost or silenced identity (Ruggles, 2010). The repurposing of this monument for Christian use resulted in different groups claiming this historical monument as part of their identity. Therefore, the meaning held by this relic hinges on individual perspective (Ruggles, 2010). The issues arising between contemporary world views and contemporary nations can be observed amongst other medieval buildings in Spain (Ruggles, 2010). The Church-Synagogue “El Tránsito” in Toledo served a Jewish population for 150 years before being converted into a church after the edict of expulsion of 1492. Despite serving as a Christian space for a much longer period, the prior claim of Jewish heritage was conspicuously established by restoring the building to its original aesthetics and stripping the Christian developments away (Ruggles, 2010). Ruggles insists that archeological truth is

⁶ Specifically, I think of the contributions of Dr. Nicolò Bucaria, Professor David Cassuto, Professor Antonella Mazzamuto, Dr. Salvatore Mazzamuto, Mauro Perani, Giuseppe Agnello and Cesare Colafemmina.

often brought forth to divert attention from the process of human selection of history. The desired layer of history put on display is a choice, even when dealing with material presence (Ruggles, 2010). As is the case in Spain, the outlook on medieval history is often a conceptualization derived from our own political needs, effectively marking all historical insight as reinterpretations of the past (Ruggles, 2010). These accounts expose how powerful representations can be. Silke Arnold-de-Simine also takes interest in constructed narratives. Recently, she was intrigued by the divergence amongst the narratives generated by Mr Straw's House, a heritage site located in the north of England, and aimed to understand the interpretations and meaning creation efforts that produced those narratives. She too comes to the conclusion that the past can be used as a political asset (Arnold-de-Simine, 2019). More specifically, in some cases, discourses of nostalgia can be brought forth to stimulate a sense of collective loss (Arnold-de-Simine, 2019).

The premise of this thesis, that heritage, as a concept, exists all around us and is produced by individuals driven by current occurrences and worries, posits that historical awareness is a process. As such, this case study embarks on a new quest to explore the connections between identity, space and memory affiliated to the Casa Bianca Mikveh, and will build up on the work that has already been published in critical heritage studies.

1.3. Research Design

1.3.1. Theoretical Perspective: Critical Heritage studies

What is heritage? What does it mean and how do we define it? It is a widely accepted fact that the events of the Second World War and the landscapes of destruction that lay in its wake inspired a movement of awareness towards the need to protect cultural heritage. However, the political, social, historical and socio-economic factors that prompted the drafting and implementation of the World Heritage Convention were in the works long before.⁷ Although we can acknowledge some terminological commonality amongst the various existing definitions of the concept of heritage, the problem lies within the fact that there is a lack of consistency, between countries, on the more subtle details of the scope.⁸ Yet, in the decades

⁷ Albert, M., & Ringbeck, B. (2015). p.45

⁸ Yahaya, A. (2006). pp.292

since UNESCO endorsed the 1972 Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, the concept of heritage and its related issues has mostly been successfully established and enforced on a global scale.⁹ Currently, the explanation as to what heritage actually is remains divided into the same two categories that were established in the 1972 Convention. Even though these definitions have been reformulated and revised various times, the underlying reasoning and validity of these heritage characteristics are still relevant.¹⁰ Natural Heritage encompasses nature and all of its resources; property; therefore, sites, areas and habitats and/or natural features and formations that are deserving of preservation due to their superior scientific or aesthetic universal value.¹¹ Cultural Heritage, in other words, man made heritage, is in itself divided into tangible and intangible aspects. Tangible expressions of Cultural Heritage comprise palpable forms; monuments, groups of buildings and/or sites.¹² Physical remainders, historic places, artefacts, etc. Objects on which great preservation value is bestowed due to their scientific, aesthetically, ethnological, historical, artistic, architectural, anthropological, technological or archeological relevance within a designated culture.¹³ Intangible expressions of Cultural Heritage are contained in the bequeathed and transmitted expressions of life of a society. Only since 2006 have these intangible expressions been truly protected by the observance of the 2003 Convention.¹⁴ Intangible heritage is the main source of cultural diversity. Passed down through the generations, it is constantly being recreated and reenacted, by actors belonging to distinct cultural groups or communities, through various interactions with their surroundings; therefore, perpetually producing a communal sentiment of continuity and identity factor. Its definition includes skills, expressions, practices, representations and knowledge, as well as all the spaces, tools, artefacts and objects linked to them, that are officially claimed by groups, individuals and communities, as part of their cultural heritage.¹⁵ These intangible expressions

⁹ Albert, M., & Ringbeck, B. (2015). p.1

¹⁰ Albert, M., & Ringbeck, B. (2015). p.17

¹¹ Albert, M., & Ringbeck, B. (2015). p.1&18

¹² Albert, M., & Ringbeck, B. (2015). p.18

¹³ Albert, M., & Ringbeck, B. (2015). p.18

¹⁴ Albert, M., & Ringbeck, B. (2015). p.159

¹⁵ Albert, M., & Ringbeck, B. (2015). p.159

may be manifested through rituals, various art forms, traditions, social practices, events, language, craftsmanship, etc.

Heritage is always the result of a society's perception of its past and its present.¹⁶ As we just saw, at its core, it is strongly linked to issues of protection strategies. Many heritage studies have developed around problematics concerning conservation strategies and popularization. Therefore the concept of heritage as a field of study and its association with tourism and history is not a novelty. I think specifically of the work of Rodney Harrison and his book entitled *Heritage: Critical Approaches* (2012). Beyond the mere definition of what is or can be heritage, Harrison explores the aspects of abundance, uncertainty and connectivity linked to the role heritage plays in our modern societies. Ambiguous and wide meaning, heritage it is not a word that should be used lightly. One thing is certain, heritage does not equal the past. According to Harrison, heritage has more to do with the relationship we hold towards the future and the present than the past.

«Heritage is not a passive process of simply preserving things from the past that remain, but an active process of assembling a series of objects, places and practices that we choose to hold up as a mirror to the present, associated with a particular set of values that we wish to take with us into the future.»(Harrison, 2012, p.4)

This sentence is interesting for several reasons. First, it states that heritage is an active operation, involving many constituencies. It also implies that it involves a deliberate selection process as well as self-representation goals. Finally, it asserts that heritage encompasses the principles people wish to promote. This way of thinking about heritage is intriguing. What is it that we choose to preserve and why? Why the past, why is it relevant today? Although the concept of heritage is one that is presently regularly debated and changing, it is, without a doubt, an idea that involves the production of the past within the present; we produce our own tomorrow. If we focus on this social aspect of the phenomenon, our investigation must aim to understand this process within a particular context, such as symmetrical archaeology. One of the main aspects of symmetrical archaeology is the notion *«[...] that the past is actively created in the work of archaeologists.»*(Harrison, 2012, p.37). Meaning heritage should be contemplated as the creation of the past in the present, inseparable from the blending of

¹⁶ Albert, M., & Ringbeck, B. (2015). p.2

humans and objects involved in the process.¹⁷ Going forward, this thesis posits that approaches to material culture will help understand heritage as a dialogue, essential to our understanding of the ways in which the past is experienced. Indeed, heritage produced within an economy sensitive to cultural visibility will aim to attract the crowds and impart relevant knowledge. In turn, allowing heritage sites to be staged experiences of the past.¹⁸ There is no denying that heritage has come to be compared to a business. Tourism has transformed the place heritage holds in our societies. To advertise individuality and worth, in order to be profitable, heritage, as a service, progressively shifted towards providing personal experiences, while still maintaining an educational uniform.¹⁹

The questions emanating from the production of meaning through texts, objects and images are central to studies focused on concerns of representation.²⁰ Who own's the past usually holds the right to regulate its representation. This thesis will explore the more omitted qualities of heritage, meaning *«its materiality, the ways in which intangible heritage practices are mediated by and power distributed within interlinked webs of people and things, and the ways in which these people and things might be said to be in dialogue with one another and with the world.»*(Harrison, 2012, p.228).

1.3.2. Method

This thesis will favour the pluralistic approach associated to case studies and will expand on the work that has already been published in the context of critical heritage studies.

While this research first began as an investigation into a contemporary socio-religious phenomenon, it has changed many times and evolved due to circumstances. In this thesis, the interest of the past lies in what is being recounted. Through a strategic analysis of several narratives constructed around and generated through the heritage site of the Casa Bianca mikveh, I will attempt to explore the role storytelling plays in constructions of history.

¹⁷ Harrison, R. (2012). p.39

¹⁸ Harrison, R. (2012). p.86

¹⁹ Harrison, R. (2012). p.87

²⁰ Harrison, R. (2012). p.107

Understanding the role this monument holds in sparking the individual and collective imagination will also be prioritized. This thesis will apply a mixed methods approach, combining a qualitative literary analysis of several media materials and a diary to field data observations.

I first began with an online research focused on the Casa Bianca Mikveh. This led me to several media articles that mentioned the monument and its involvement in a contemporary socio-religious phenomenon. While a variety of articles related to this subject were available, I selected three specific texts to further analyze, based on the topics they discussed and on the fact that they centred on the town of Syracuse specifically. I hypothesized that through a literary analysis of the themes and underlining ideas enclosed within these articles, a better understanding of the meaning of the Casa Bianca Mikveh could be obtained.

Later, I did the same with the diary authored and published by the private owner of the Casa Bianca Mikveh. The diary, as one of the main narratives circulating about the monument, needed to be analyzed in the same manner as the mediated articles.

The rendition of the past that is told via these different narratives; what, when, why, who, which, by whom and how, were the points of the issue. What is remembered and what was left to be lost? What forms do these tales take? When are these stories told and why? Who are we talking about and who is speaking of them? Was something changed? Does the narrative correlate with modern controversies?²¹ Let us not forget that all history is a construct, something that we build, that has a range of possible accounts. History is built as much as it is told. Many have made it their life's work to write history, to recount these various stories. Attempting such feats is never easy nor can it be impartial. Humans as individuals cannot dissociate themselves from who they are and what made them who they are. Therefore, the process of writing history cannot be regarded as independent from its author and his/her perceptions and views of the world. Narrative will always be undeniably affected by its creator's culture, philosophy, gender, education, time, etc. Despite methods criticisms and historiography, history will always remain at risk of being used as a political tool. However, it is by acknowledging the value of heritage as a political resource that we can better comprehend the past and its pertinence today. This is why this thesis traces the various

²¹ Macdonald, S. (2013). p.27-28

formed narratives immersed in the socio-cultural context of Jewish Syracuse. Those who study culture and societies know there are many ways in which the human character can assert itself; narratives being one of them.²² After all, what is narration other than a method used to transmit a story?

I position myself in contrast to the radical social historians who once rejected the idea of narratives based on the perspective that they fixate on important historical figures at the cost of losing sight of the common crowd. My interests are focused on a more contemporary outlook concerning narratives and the stories that they tell. Cultural narratives, especially, can provide invaluable insight into the world in which they are told.²³

This project is not intended as an inquiry to determine a dominant narrative current. In fact, it aims to explore and make sense of this heritage site as a complex machine eliciting interpretation and endeavours to provide meaning which result in a range of narratives. While we explore this monument as an entity that enables certain interpretations, the main goal is not to decipher its one true meaning but rather to present how meaning is produced and shaped via these narratives. I am attentive to the stories circulating, recognizing them as meaning making accessories inseparable from the historical context and socio-cultural conditions surrounding the Jews of Sicily, especially in regard to religious apartheid.

Through the literary analysis conducted of the owner's diary as well as the three mediated Jewish articles, I would argue that additional layers of understanding concerning heritage sites were obtained. Additionally, it helped provide much insight into the relationship between historical construction and cultural memory. As such, the leading theoretical apparatus and methodology applied to this case study was successful in ascertaining the connections between memory, space and identity.

²² As a phenomenon, narrative is a very important issue within the study of history. Of course, it is not a surprise that it would also be a fundamental element of literary studies. The difference lies in the fact that in literature, the object being studied, the narrative, is already completely shaped. Within the field of historical studies, however, these narrative objects require assembly, if not entirely, then in some partial measure (Meuter, 2009. p.242). As its name implies, narratology concerns itself with narratives. To this day, it is a notion that is difficult to define. Through the years, it has been described, amongst other things, as a method, a theory, a discipline (Meister, 2009. p.329). Multiple researcher such as Barthes, Genette and Todorov have explored this paradigm as an object of study. Despite the amount of attention it has received since the 60', experts have yet to agree on a complete and coherent theoretical definition of narratology (Meister, 2009. p.341). In the 80', specialists aimed to determine narrative universals. Within this conceptualization, narratology commits itself to the analysis of the standards, reasoning and form of narrative representation (Meister, 2009. p.329).

²³ Burke, P. (2018). p.125-126

1.3.3. Auxiliary Materials

While this thesis mostly engages the written narrative framework surrounding the Casa Bianca Mikveh, an ethnographic analysis based on primary data (observations, photos, notes & testimonies), collected during a two weeks field research in Syracuse in November 2018, will be combined in order to trace and remark upon the politics of representation currently active in the area.

The original online search done on the Casa Bianca Mikveh uncovered a number of articles and stories related to its influence and context today. It also uncovered the actual monument; material remains located within an up and coming touristic destination. A space that can be touched and visited, part of a larger framework of Jewish tangible and intangible heritage as well as marketed tourism. I hypothesized that the narrative framework surrounding the Casa Bianca Mikveh is entwined with the way it is perceived as a presentation. Therefore, it is inseparable from the notion of experience. Based on the assumption that the success of a narrative depends on engagement and the ability to connect with the story being told, I needed to explore all the facets of the story. This meant travelling to Syracuse and seeing for myself the physical representations on display. Although most of the filed-work consisted of exploring, observing, taking pictures and notes of the physical staging of Jewish historical presence in Syracuse, I also entertained a series of informal conversations with a number of local and visiting ‘actors’ to gather testimonies and impressions. Through my own visits of the Jewish quarter of Ortygia, the Casa Bianca mikveh and other related sites, I connected with our conception of heritage as being attached to its environment, which establishes aspects of Jewish material culture as being as essential to narrative production as written narratives. This ‘on the ground’ experience allowed for certain data to be collected which would not have been attainable otherwise. Additionally, travelling to Syracuse was necessary in order to procure the diary intended for analysis, only available on site. With this admission, it should be deduced that, chronologically, the filed work of this research was conducted before any written narrative analysis. This granted me a prior perception of the degree of strength these narratives hold on site and also resulted in new discoveries.

Due to ethical reasons related to the safety and well being of all involved in this research project, a large percentage of the knowledge acquired during this field work will not be revealed or published. In order to accommodate these ethical omissions, a new path of inquiry replaced the original intent of this thesis. While a variety of obstacles were encountered during the data collection process, the new trajectory and its results also make up a fascinating report.

2. Analysis

2.1. Framework

In may 1986, a new discovery was made on Ortygia. A hypogeum, entirely carved into the rock, was unearthed during the renovations of the palazzo Bianca. It was later identified as an underground structure housing Jewish ritual baths in almost perfect condition, fitting the typical description of a miqveh.²⁴

The Casa Bianca mikveh on Via Alagona has a total of five immersion basins; three in the main room, while the other two are located on its opposite sides, in small flanking chambers. The three central basins are in a clover-shape formation, each one is 140cm deep and flowing with pure water, accessible via steps carved directly into the rock.²⁵ The room is more than 10 meters deep underground, in a square shaped chamber more than 5 meters wide on each side, with stone benches emerging from three of its four walls. Four large pillars brace a beautiful central cross vault and four smaller barrel vaults. A flared mouth vertical chimney, most likely intended for light and ventilation, can be found on the ceiling, to the left of the descending staircase.²⁶ It hovers over a circular shaped well, perhaps intended for crockery immersion or water heating.²⁷ Recent studies conducted in the area revealed that, in the early Middle Ages, the structure was used as a public bath and served a Jewish population estimated at 3000. The mikveh, predominantly used by the women of the community, was part of a larger synagogue complex. Access to its underground compound was possible

²⁴ Scandaliato, A. (2011). p.75

²⁵ Scandaliato, A. (2011). p.77

²⁶ Mulè, N. - Scandaliato, A. (2015). p.40

²⁷ Scandaliato, A. (2011). p.77

through a side door connected to the old alley 'rua di li bagni'.²⁸ The current assumption, partially deduced from the Byzantine architecture and craftsmanship identified in the hypogeum's main chamber, is that this mikveh was in use from the 7th to the 15th century.²⁹ This would mark the Casa Bianca mikveh as one of the oldest and largest mikva'ot in Europe. In 1492, when the Spanish rulers' edict of expulsion or conversion was issued, Jewish presence in Sicily disappeared rather quickly and apparently, so did these ritual baths, until now. The mere discovery of such an institution, an essential building for a Jewish community, as well as a crucial element for a synagogue structure, meant the turning point for research being done on the presence and history of the Jews of Syracuse. After all, for over 500 years, this secret was lying in wait.

Surrounded on all sides by the Mediterranean sea, the beautiful island of Ortygia is an integral part of the town of Siracusa, in Sicily. It was one of the first ports established in the region by the Corinthian Greeks around 733 BC.³⁰ Its decent size, as well as its position, situated at the eastern end of the town of Syracuse and detached from the coast by a small canal, made Ortygia a logical port city as well as a decent stronghold in its early days. Archaeological data gathered from research undergone in the 20th century associates the earliest legitimate signs of Jewish presence in Sicily to the 3rd and 4th centuries.³¹ Although different groups of Jewish diaspora are suspected of having been present in the area since the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem. It is most likely that these groups were composed initially of prisoners and slaves but eventually progressed into craftsmen positions, farmers and landowners.³² In the time of the Byzantine empire, the Jews of the area truly prospered and flourished as slave traders, artisans and landowners. Though their presence was tolerated due to their significant economic importance, as a people, they were also pushed aside and segregated because of their different religious beliefs. This follows the usual global pattern we

²⁸ Mulè, N. - Scandaliato, A. (2015). p.39

²⁹ Mulè, N. - Scandaliato, A. (2015). p.43

³⁰ Belford, R.(2017). p.213

(This reference, although not quite as academic as one would prefer, was selected for its use in the field. Its relevance can be justified by the fact that this is a tool tourists use today when they explore Syracuse. It is a tool I used, both as a researcher and as a tourist during my time there.)

³¹ Mulè, N. - Scandaliato, A. (2015). p.9

³² Mulè, N. - Scandaliato, A. (2015). p.8

can observe of the treatment reserved for Jewish communities, throughout history.³³ The traces of Jewish symbolism revealed by archaeological excavations of the area suggest that Jewish communities of eastern Sicily first settled in Akradina, on the mainland, not on Ortygia. However, it would appear Akradina was eventually considered an official component of Syracuse, later on in the Byzantine era.³⁴ It is probably at this point in time, in the seventh century, that the Jewish community relocated to Ortygia. This information was surmised from recorded documents concerning the request of a new synagogue to be built. Although Christian religious authorities first denied this request, Byzantine power subsequently intervened to grant the petition.³⁵ Any new or relocating Jewish community would have specific occupancy standards, in urban space especially. The urgent need for ritual baths, a synagogue, cemeteries and slaughterhouses would make the need for easy access to water their first concern.³⁶ Amidst the plethora of wells and cisterns accounted for on Ortygia, it is no wonder that the growing community of Syracusan Jews chose to settle there, in the second half of the 7th century.³⁷ By the time the Arabs finally subdued Syracuse in 877 AD, the Giudecca, the Jewish quarter of Ortygia, was already well established and adhered to the city's structural evolution through the medieval ages, while still maintaining its specificity and cultural character, despite continuous attempt at conformity.³⁸

Nowadays, the island is mostly referred to as 'the old city'. It can be accessed thanks to two bridges that connect it to the mainland. Modernised, touristic and appealing, the old city has become an exciting destination for shopping, tourism and restoration, yet it remains a strong residential area for the locals. Despite its small size, this island has great historical importance. It is the epicentre of Syracuse and, to this day, holds many famous monuments such as the Tempio di Apollo, the Fonte Aretusa, The Duomo and the Castello Maniace.³⁹ In

³³ Mulè, N. - Scandaliato, A. (2015). p.9

³⁴ Mulè, N. - Scandaliato, A. (2015). p.11

³⁵ Mulè, N. - Scandaliato, A. (2015). p.10-11

³⁶ Mulè, N. - Scandaliato, A. (2015). p.11

³⁷ Mulè, N. - Scandaliato, A. (2015). p.40

³⁸ Mulè, N. - Scandaliato, A. (2015). p.12-13

³⁹ These monuments are but a few of the many attractions one can see in Siracusa and mainly on Ortygia. The temple of Apollo is believed to be the very first of the magnificent Doric temples built in the area, dating from the 7th or 6th century before the common era. (Belford, 2017, p.215) Now a cathedral, The Duomo was once a great treasure of the ancient world, a temple dedicated to Athena; its construction first started around 530 BC. (Belford, 2017, p.217)

2005, Syracuse and the Rocky Necropolis of Pantalica were placed under the official protection of the World Heritage Convention. Following a nomination based on a thorough evaluation conducted by ICOMOS, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee inscribed the property on the World Heritage List based on the following criteria:

- «*Criterion ii: The sites and monuments which form the Syracuse/Pantalica ensemble constitute a unique accumulation, down the ages and in the same space, of remarkable testimonies to Mediterranean cultures.*»(ICOMOS, 2005, Document WHC-05/29.COM/8B, p.134)
- «*Criterion iii: The Syracuse/Pantalica ensemble offers, through its remarkable cultural diversity, an exceptional testimony to the development of civilisation over some three millennia.*»(ICOMOS, 2005, Document WHC-05/29.COM/8B, p.134)
- «*Criterion iv: The group of monuments and archaeological sites situated in Syracuse (between the nucleus of Ortygia and the vestiges located throughout the urban area) is the finest example of outstanding architectural creation spanning several cultural aspects (Greek, Roman and Baroque).*»(ICOMOS, 2005, Document WHC-05/29.COM/8B, p.134)
- «*Criterion vi: Ancient Syracuse was directly linked to events, ideas and literary works of outstanding universal significance.*»(ICOMOS, 2005, Document WHC-05/29.COM/8B, p. 134)

Although its association to the World Heritage List is relatively recent, the idea that the historical centre of Ortygia has value and needs to be cared for, is not. In fact, as early as 1976, the Sicilian Region issued a law intending to protect and rescue the old city brimming with historical sites. They also desired to rehabilitate the cultural, social and serviceable aspects of the island in order to warrant economic growth.

Like many ancient cities influenced by Greek traditions and culture, we find that some of its foundation stories are encased within Greek mythology; the legend of Arethusa and

Alpheus.⁴⁰ This legend is proudly displayed by the inhabitants of Syracuse, even to this day. Like many other myths and legends, this story is rooted within the public history and culture of Syracuse. The small body of fresh water present on Ortygia is still referred too as the Arethusa Fountain, and her story is on display there for all to see, in Italian and English. Indeed, it has become one of the main attractions of the island.⁴¹ The strangeness of this source of fresh water parallel to the seashore extends to this thesis's primary focus; the Jewish baths of Syracuse, the mikveh of the Giudecca of Ortygia. According to a legend recorded by Jouvin; a pilgrim having dropped his drinking bowl and seven coins while quenching his thirst on the banks of a river in the Holy Land, found them later in the Fountain of Arethusa, upon his arrival in Syracuse. According to some, this would mark the miqveh of Ortygia and its mythical water as the target of a journey connecting the Holy Land and Sicily.⁴²

Like most of the other historical monuments of the city, the Casa Bianca Mikveh can be visited. It rests, as we mentioned before, under a beautifully restored 17th-century residence now known as the Residence hotel Alla Giudecca. However, unlike most of the other monuments around Ortygia, which are publicly operated historical sites⁴³, the mikveh is privately owned.⁴⁴ Both the hypogeum and the hotel are owned and managed by Amalia Daniele, the same woman who restored the hotel and discovered these baths not so long ago. The mikveh visits are guided and usually occur every day for a few hours in the morning and a few hours in the afternoon. It is not accessible to handicaps as the subterranean chamber is only attainable via multiple levels of steep stone carved stairs. It is at the bottom of those

⁴⁰ The nymph, Arethusa, was a favoured companion of the goddess of the hunt, Artemis. It is said that Arethusa was so alluring that any men who looked at her could not help but desire her. One day, the son of the Titan god of the sea, Alpheus, saw her and could not help but be bewitched by her beauty. Finishing a hunt with Artemis, Arethusa decided to bathe in a river, away from her mistress. Alpheus, enamoured beyond reason, seized the opportunity to become the river so he could enjoy her body. Scared of the whirlpool Alpheus was creating in his new shape, the nymph tried to leave the river but was stopped by Alpheus's physical form. Fearing for her virginity, the nymph ran, but Alpheus gave chase. Exhausted, Arethusa pleaded Artemis for help, asking her to transform her into water and to carry her as far away from her aggressor as possible. Artemis granted her protégée's request and helped hide her from Alpheus within a thick fog. Then, the goddess transformed the nymph into a freshwater spring and carried her to Ortygia, far away from Greece. Unfortunately, Alpheus, helped by Zeus, also became a river, materialising alongside the poor Arethusa.

⁴¹ Belford, R.(2017). p.220

⁴² Mulè, N. - Scandaliato, A. (2015). p.45

⁴³ Alio, J. (2012).

⁴⁴ While it is true that the Casa Bianca mikveh, as well as the hotel complex attached to it, are private property, the majority of the monuments and sites in Syracuse are public holdings. This means that they are owned and managed by the Italian State, that is to say, the Ministry of the Interior. Other managers include the province or Municipality of Syracuse and the region of Sicily. (ICOMOS, 2005)

steps that the mikveh chamber can be found, all its pools still flowing with the same water supply it had when it seemingly disappeared from sight 500 years ago.

2.1.1. Mythical Water

When we think about it, the idea of a mikveh is quite simple. Literally translated from Hebrew, 'mikveh' means "a collection of water". However, its implications are more intricate. These baths are special, different from a simple goal of fleshly hygiene.⁴⁵ In the Bible, the notion of being impure is offensive to God. Only through immersion in uncorrupted flowing water can ritual purity be achieved. Therefore, purification achieved through a mikveh is emblematic of renewal, rebirth; a change in status.⁴⁶

Ritual baths and the formalities ascribed to them are meant to purge the body of all impurities, but to be considered and used for ritual immersions, a mikveh basin must hold a minimum of 40 se'ah⁴⁷ of pure water.⁴⁸ Most of the time, the simple approach consisted of making use of a natural source, since the water intended for such rituals cannot be previously stocked in a container or pulled. Therefore, rain wells, rivers, the sea and natural springs have been most commonly used for such purposes. Water from melted snow and ice is also an approved source. As we can imagine, such specific rules encounter obstacles in urban and highly populated areas. In these metropolitan areas, rainwater is collected and guided from roofs through canals and pipes into mikveh pools. Sometimes, however, these methods are not sufficient to fill up a large pool in which individuals can fully immerse themselves. In these cases, exceptions are made and pumped water, from the tap, can be used to dispense enough water to a mikveh basin, but only if it is added to the minimum prescribed amount of clean "collected" water.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Mikveh. (1996). p. 306-307

⁴⁶ Mulè, N. - Scandaliato, A. (2015). p.30-31

⁴⁷ The se'ah is an ancient unit of dry measure, used in Jewish law, that corresponds to 1/3 of an ephah, a 22 litres bath (Weights & Measures, 2008). In the context of a mikveh, the exact volume referred to by a se'ah differs in order to accommodate rules on immersion, based on a mikveh's dimensions. A mikveh must contain enough water to cover the whole body.

⁴⁸ Mulè, N. - Scandaliato, A. (2015). p.37

⁴⁹ Mikveh. (1996). p. 306-307

It is mandated that every “person with a discharge” that needs ritual immersion to obtain purification must do so in a mikveh.⁵⁰ Specifically, Leviticus 11-15 summarises a number of impurities that could potentially touch any Israelite. Impurities such as childbirth, bodily discharges, unclean animals, skin diseases, etc (Lev 12,2; 15,15-13; No. 19,19; Dt. 23,12). Most impurities have their own particular purification rituals associated to them; however, all of them include some form or a combination of washing either objects, clothes or the body.⁵¹

Currently, Jewish purification baths are utilised especially by new converts and by women after their monthly period. Contrary to popular belief, women are not the only ones to make use of these pools to free themselves from ritual uncleanness. For instance, scribes, religious texts transcribers, must submerge themselves before they write the name of God. Some believers cleanse themselves before important holidays, and some do it every Friday in preparation for Shabbat. The very devout, of course, do not wait for Yom Kippur or Rosh Hashanah, they submerge themselves once a day, every day. They also submerge any tools, particularly utensils, that were manufactured by non-Jewish people.⁵² Jonathan Lawrence identified, within the Hebrew Bible, three categories in which ritual purification through washing are bestowed; general, priestly and theophanies.⁵³ Needless to say that, within the Jewish faith, matters of purity are extraordinarily complex and touch an extensive range of topics. What is essential for us to remember here is that no matter the type or cause of the impurity, no matter how private or personal they are to an individual, they are issues that involve the entire community.⁵⁴ Jewish faith is designed to be present and expressed in every aspect of an individual’s life. It is a belief system where theology, ethics, customs, culture and daily rites intermingle. To understand the importance of ritual baths, it is essential that we attempt to comprehend the collective Jewish mentality, especially in regard to preserving the purity of the family unit.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Mikveh. (1996). p. 306-307

⁵¹ Lawrence, J. (2006). p.26

⁵² Mikveh. (1996). p. 306-307.

⁵³ I will not explore this particular topic further as it would require a whole book to explore that subject alone. For more information see Lawrence, J. (2006). *Washing in water*, p.26-32

⁵⁴ Lawrence, J. (2006). p.29

⁵⁵ Mulè, N. - Scandaliato, A. (2015). p.29-30 & Miller, S. S. (2010).p.239

Although purification rituals were never intended exclusively for women, Jewish doctrine and mentality concerning gender segregation are entwined with the precepts of impurity and fertility, notions that, historically often, define the existence of a Jewish woman. Indeed, we find the source of certain obligations in Leviticus, but it is through the Talmud and the Mishnah that rules are transmitted.⁵⁶ The Mishnah is a main component of the Jewish canon, as equally important a holy book as the Hebrew Bible.⁵⁷ Of course, there are and have been different forms of Judaism but, according to Jacob Neusner, if one wishes to truly grasp the complexity of what it is to be Jewish, one must start with the Mishnah.⁵⁸ In its sixth division/section, called *Purities*, the Mishnah reveals to the Israelites a way of living, a rule book concerning cleanness. It considers all that which could cause uncleanness, how and onto what, as well as how to rid oneself of it.⁵⁹ Within the Mishnah, the law of Niddah⁶⁰ classifies menstruation impurities, overseeing topics from abortion, miscarriages and labour to regular menstruation, virgin blood and more. «*For all women it is sufficient for them to reckon uncleanness from their time of discovering a flow*»(Niddah 1:1).⁶¹ From then on, Niddah law forbids sexual intercourse until the seventh day after the end of the cyclic blood flow.

Thanks to data and architectural proof preserved on important archaeological sites such as Masada and Qumran, we know that ritual baths had come to be considered essential by Jewish communities arising out of the Second Temple period.⁶² The writers of the Second Temple literature, mostly made up of early Christians, the Qumran community, as well as Hellenized Jews in the Diaspora and Palestine, referred to the Hebrew Bible to support and justify their own customs.⁶³ These communities were established according to the purity laws in effect at the time; references to it can be found in Leviticus 11:36. Furthermore, the fact

⁵⁶ Mulè, N. - Scandaliato, A. (2015). p.29

⁵⁷ Neusner, J. (1988). p.xiv-xv

⁵⁸ Neusner, J. (1988). p.xxix

⁵⁹ Neusner, J. (1988). p.xxx

⁶⁰ Glossary - Niddah: "A women unclean through menstruation" (Neusner, 1988, p.1142)

⁶¹ Neusner, J. (1988). p.1077

⁶² Mikveh. (1996). p. 306-307

⁶³ Lawrence, J. (2006). p.23

that these venues and practices have endured the test of time and can be found all over the world, dating from different eras, is a testament to the commitment the Jews place on purification axioms.⁶⁴ In fact, according to Miller, the viability of the idea of purity in its connection to holiness, as well as its impact in every day precepts, omnipresent within Jewish sacred texts, was instrumental in overcoming the void left by the destruction of the temple.⁶⁵

2.1.2. Visibility

Historically, Jewish communities have almost constantly belonged to an ethnico-cultural minority, no matter where they went. As such, their way of life was often a victim of circumstance. Composites of their ways, parameters that would typically be considered constants, were rendered susceptible to bias, restrictions and the general whims of the dominant ethnic group of the time period and place.⁶⁶ After their expulsion in 1492, when Jews were either forced to convert to Christianity or leave Sicily, everyone was under scrutiny from the Inquisition. Consequently, even the practice of washing the female body was basis enough for an accusation, on the grounds that female ritual immersion is characteristic of Jewish identity.⁶⁷ Therefore, a monument dedicated to such rituals could not remain, and just like the synagogue and the street signs, its visibility was withdrawn.

It would appear that during the 18th century, the hypogeum, or rather a revealed section of the main underground chamber, was being used as a reservoir. We know of three Syracusan scholars said to have visited the place between the late 17th century to the early 19th centuries. All three describe it with surprise. The space was thought to be something that was once used by the Jews, but it was not identified as a bath. No new mention of the place was made from that point onwards, until Amalia Daniele's discovery.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Mikveh. (1996). p. 306-307

⁶⁵ Miller, S. S. (2010).p.241

⁶⁶ For example, Mulè and Scandaliato mention that, during the Middle Ages, Sephardi communities and their religious leaders were affected by Christianity and its adverse attitude towards coitus, resulting in a reinforcement of quelling Jewish customs. (Mulè - Scandaliato, 2015. p.30-31)

⁶⁷ Mulè, N. - Scandaliato, A. (2015). p.35

⁶⁸ Mulè, N. - Scandaliato, A. (2015). p.39

The ten years of excavation and subsequent work revolving around the discovery of the Casa Bianca mikveh have exposed one of the oldest Jewish communities in Sicily. According to Mulè and Scandaliato, the recognition and survey conducted on the nearby church of St. John the Baptist, that revealed it as the 15th-century synagogue of the Giudecca, substantiates the claim of these ritual baths. They belonged to a significant and culturally distinguished community, the second largest in Sicily.⁶⁹ This is no small thing. The excitement over this historical monument being brought to light is evident by the interest of several scholars, internationals and locals alike. However, it would seem that academics are not the only ones who were inspired by this wonder. A variety of narratives now circulate and construct a specific image of the Jewish past of Syracuse. For example, I first found out about this monument through an article published in *Best of Sicily MAGAZINE*.⁷⁰ It told the story of the oldest mikveh in Europe. Although the article seemed to be intended for travel aficionados, it intrigued me on a deeper level. The author, historian Jacqueline Alio, wrote that the mikveh had been used by the Jewish community recently, meaning that this archaeological treasure was one of the oldest Jewish purification baths still being used. A rarity, to say the least, but more than that she asserted that this monument was «*a living legacy*» (Alio, 2012). Later, I found other remarkable stories detailing an unexpected phenomenon; a Jewish revival happening in the south of Italy. Some stories focused their sights on Syracuse while others mentioned cities experiencing a similar occurrence. In 2017, the *New York Times* published an article about the Jews of Palermo reclaiming their lost history.⁷¹ In 2010, *Haaretz* published an account from the Italian region of Calabria.⁷² Although these articles had different actors, locations and focus, most of them mentioned Rabbi Stefano Di Mauro, a Sicilian who after decades spent in America, returned to Sicily to help people reclaim their Jewish heritage. One article published in 2017 by *The Economist* even clearly stated that the discovery of the ancient mikveh in Syracuse is part of what inspired Di Mauro to return to his native land.⁷³ Proceeding along this analysis section, I will

⁶⁹ Mulè, N. - Scandaliato, A. (2015). p.39

⁷⁰ Alio, J. (2012).

⁷¹ See Povoledo, E. (2017).

⁷² See Bankier, A. (2010).

⁷³ See S. D'I. & ERASMUS. (2017).

present and dissect similar narratives involving the Jewish community of Syracuse and The Casa Bianca mikveh in order to ascertain their reach and purpose.

2.2. Diary

It was during my second visit to the Casa Bianca mikveh that I happened upon the little hotel gift shop I was hoping to find. I desperately needed to lay my hands on Amalia Daniele's diary. I first found out about its existence via an article from *The Museum Times*, a website committed to shining more light on lesser-known museums around the world. Author and publisher Elizabeth Joss aims to spread the word on what she calls 'hidden gems'.⁷⁴ In 2017, she published an article about the Jewish baths of Siracusa in which she recounts the story of its discovery. She also mentions the owner, her work within the community and the book she wrote about the mikveh, available for purchase at the 'museum shop'.⁷⁵

Not only is this diary a first-hand record on a monumental discovery, but it is also the only record we have of this discovery. A published personal journal of the owner's story, the story she remembers, the story she wishes to recount. It is more than likely that it was titled as a diary due to its format, meaning it contains thought processing and shared feelings by the author. It can also be said that some of the entries are dated. However, by the style and rhythm of the writing, it would seem unlikely that the text was composed over a significant length of time as is usually the case with private diaries. This particular diary was not intended as a personal and hidden literary work. It is made quite apparent from the start that this story was composed and intended for public reading and distribution. Authored by Amalia Daniele Di Bagni⁷⁶ and published by the Siracusa III Millennio society, this book of approximately 43 pages⁷⁷ costs 12 euros and can, so far, only be purchased in the small hotel gift shop located over the ancient Jewish baths. Materially, it is quite small, thin and pliable (paperback) almost

⁷⁴ The Museum Times. (2019). About. Retrieved from <http://themuseumtimes.com/about-me/>

⁷⁵ Joss, E. (2017).

⁷⁶ Though this is the full name the author printed on the cover of her published diary, it would appear that the affiliation "Di Bagni" is supplementary to her legal name. One could assume that the use of "Di Bagni" which means "of the bath rooms" in Italian is an attempt to link herself with the mikveh to a greater extent.

⁷⁷ I say approximately 43 pages because although page numeration ends at 43, the textual contents of the diary are often discontinued by the inclusion of photographic evidence. Photographic data also continues after page 43.

8 inches in length and 5.5 inches wide. The English version is said to have been published only recently, that is in 2016. Therefore, the copy we are about to analyze is a translation.⁷⁸

“*Diary of a discovery of a Paradise without apples...at the JEWISH BATHS OF SIRACUSA*” is divided into four sections.

The first section of the diary brings us back in time. Set in the commune of Augusta, Sicily, in April 1949, when Amalia Daniele was but four years of age. She recounts the story of how her family moved to the country, into a large white house with a library and a fencing room. The house was in a very sorry state due to the fact that it had been seized and used by the Allies during the war. She echos the story of her childhood, the house renovations, the religious rituals and prayer in front of the large copy of the Madonna, the routine of walking around the countryside with her father or visiting her favourite areas where she would search and collect a variety of items. One of these areas is now the archaeological site of Megara Hyblea. She depicts a picture of the rhythm of the prosperous country life she enjoyed while growing up. She finishes this part by admitting that when she was in middle school, she discovered that the Madonna, the one she previously mentioned in her story, the one in front of whom the old ladies of her household, and sometimes her parents, would say the rosary, was actually a copy of the famous Mona Lisa painting. However, she kept silent, kept the truth a secret. She admits that even though she left that place and her life changed over the years, the one thing that remains unaltered in her character is her deep respect for the feelings of others. She thinks this was somehow life preparing her for what lay ahead.⁷⁹

In the second part of the diary⁸⁰, via a new entry, we are figuratively transported to Siracusa, in May 1986, where Amalia Daniele resumes her story with the drawn-out purchase and renovation project for a building located in the centre of the Jewish Quarter of Ortygia,

⁷⁸ If this piece of work is indeed from the hand of the owner of the baths and not the work of a ghostwriter, and even if that were the case, it is more than likely that the original text was written in Italian and not in English. Therefore, we must take into account, as one of my undergraduate professors used to say, that all acts of translation are also acts of sorrow. Meaning that we lose something every time we translate anything into another language because language is fundamentally cultural. Subtle cultural references may be overlooked or may be irrelevant in another tongue. So, acknowledge it we must, but it does not invalidate our aim to analyze this diary in its English version textually.

⁷⁹ Di Bagni, Amalia Daniele, 2016. p.5-11

⁸⁰ Di Bagni, Amalia Daniele, 2016. p.11-31

Siracusa, an area which she describes as utterly forsaken and dilapidated.⁸¹ The next two pages are dedicated to pictures⁸² encompassing the dirty roads of Siracusa and some wall facades in terrible shape, one of them covered in graffiti.⁸³ The building she bought, which she calls her 'palazzo' was buried in garbage, disfigured and gutted of all that could be considered useful, from flooring and doors to small accessories. Yet, she tells us, she considered it beautiful.⁸⁴ Four pictures of the ransacked interior of the palazzo follow this paragraph.⁸⁵ Despite its dilapidated state, the construction reminded her of her childhood countryside estate, impressive and vulnerable. She shares that even the graffitis were somewhat familiar. Parts of the palazzo were owned by different people. Therefore she purchased the building, one piece at a time, and admits that, to this day, she is still indebted by the cost. She encountered several obstacles along the way, in addition to the vandals dumping waste, succession issues erupted during one of the sales of the core of the edifice. Finally, when all was settled, she could finally begin careful renovations, restoring what could be restored, conscientious of the building's long history and wishing to protect it.⁸⁶

She reveals to us that towards the end of these extensive renovations, there was still one part of her palazzo that remained a mystery to her. Adjacent to the courtyard was a structure without any entry point or distinct function. Unable to let the matter rest, she set off to solve this last piece of the puzzle. With the assistance of a worker, she penetrated the wall and uncovered a modest but beautiful space brimming with soil. Still unaware of its purpose, they cleared the room and uncovered a descending staircase. A picture of the said staircase, mostly buried, accompanies this passage of the diary. Clearing out the stairs was no easy feat. One hundred and fifty-six truckloads of debris were evacuated.⁸⁷ On the next page, we see a

⁸¹ Di Bagni, Amalia Daniele, 2016. p.11

⁸² Seemingly, these photos were included to illustrate the suggested state of the area at the time. However, there is no location or dates associated with these pictures, nor are they credited to anyone. This goes for all the images amassed within the diary. Having been to Ortygia myself, within the past year, these streets look familiar. However, the images could have been taken recently as they are an accurate representation of Ortygia's overall condition today.

⁸³ Di Bagni, Amalia Daniele, 2016. p.12-13

⁸⁴ Di Bagni, Amalia Daniele, 2016. p.14

⁸⁵ Di Bagni, Amalia Daniele, 2016. p.14-16

⁸⁶ Di Bagni, Amalia Daniele, 2016. p.16

⁸⁷ Di Bagni, Amalia Daniele, 2016. p.17

picture of the cleared staircase with four workers. Alongside the image, Amalia Daniele's words keep flowing. She remarks that the cost of clearing out the steps was colossal. Discouraging as well were the various trespassing incidents that occurred and would always delay progress. Nevertheless, she tells us she persevered, driven by her intense desire to know what lay underneath. Below this passage of the diary a picture of the pollution and desecration caused by the numerous visits of these vandals is inserted.⁸⁸

Our author admits that she had no clue as to what could be buried below her palazzo. Once uncovered, the staircase was revealed to be made up of three flights of stairs and fifty-eight gradations. At the bottom, they found a room unlike anything she had ever seen before, almost overflowing with mud. Annexed to this section is a photograph of the ritual baths as they are today. She continues the tale of her discovery by giving us details of what they found at the time, eighteen meters underground. A square shaped space carved directly into the bed-rock, approximately five meters each side, surrounded by benches, and supported by four large pillars. These pillars rose up to brace what our author describes as a cross-vault in flawless condition. The hypogeum was packed with mud and clearing it was no easy task according to our author.⁸⁹

Regular flooding caused problems for all involved and more powerful pumps had to be used to clear everything out. Once the task was done, three individual stepped pools were uncovered, positioned in between the room's support pillars, in the shape of a cloverleaf. Two small additional side rooms, each with their own basins, were also discovered. Both these rooms were also brimming in mud, due to the fact that all five pools were supplied by natural spring water straight from an underground river. Amalia Daniele pursued her exploration and, within the various pools, found small oil lamps and fragile pottery fragments. Despite her apprehension that the workers might damage some pieces, even more, her ambition was to be able to assemble and reconstruct these fragmented artefacts. She tells us that she began probing through the freezing water, searching the pool beds herself with improvised plastic containers and draining them through filters as to not miss any pieces. In the end, her efforts were to no avail, but she admits to having felt oddly enthusiastic despite the complete mystery

⁸⁸ Di Bagni, Amalia Daniele, 2016. p.18

⁸⁹ Di Bagni, Amalia Daniele, 2016. p.19

still surrounding her discovery. One day, she decided to return to the basics and consider the fact that this building was located in the Jewish quarter.⁹⁰

She confesses that this epiphany triggered an intensive learning chapter for her. Wishing to understand it, she started to explore this unknown world of knowledge and symbols. She wanted answers and through some old books recognized that some spoke of this space as Jewish sacred cleansing baths. Seeking answers, she travelled to the Synagogue in Rome but came back disappointed. However, she says that only some months later, Professor David Cassuto and Dr Nicolò Bucaria showed up. She designates both scholars as influential personalities of Jewish culture. This was when things started to change, according to her. These academics ushered many more to come, instigating a series of interviews, publications and visits. The incoming interest surrounding the mikveh also produced an enthusiastic quest in search of where the old synagogue was located. Amalia Daniele even shares that Cassuto encouraged her to look for it. She shares that it was her devotion to this place that helped her find it. She noticed an inscription, one she had always thought to be in Arabic, on the church of San Giovannello, located very near the mikveh. It was Professor Antonella Mazzamuto and Dr Salvatore Mazzamuto, her brother, who finally translated it while they were visiting one day. It was revealed to be a dedication to the ancient Siracusan synagogue.⁹¹

Thanks to this translated inscription, it was deduced that the church of San Giovannello was undoubtedly the old synagogue. Amalia Daniele continues, describing the church as small, charming and serene. Inserted, at this point in her text, is a picture of the carved inscription. She also describes the church's rose window, its portal and façade, slim stones columns and gothic arches, all standards of medieval design. With no doors, no roof and overflowing vegetation, she considered it unloved, and so, adopted it as her own and cleared up all the accumulated garbage.⁹²

The next page in the diary is entirely dedicated to a picture of the front façade of the Church of San Giovannello.⁹³ On the one after that are three photographs illustrating the natural and

⁹⁰ Di Bagni, Amalia Daniele, 2016. p.20

⁹¹ Di Bagni, Amalia Daniele, 2016. p.21-22

⁹² Di Bagni, Amalia Daniele, 2016. p.22

⁹³ Di Bagni, Amalia Daniele, 2016. p.23

open-air ambience of the inside of the church.⁹⁴ Resuming her story, Amalia Daniele shares that she was resentful of the residents of the quarter, the ones desecrating this church and Ortygia's streets with their garbage, for there was no possibility of it being the fault of tourists.⁹⁵

Then, our author introduces the third discovery of this section of her diary.⁹⁶ Another Hebrew inscription was found.⁹⁷ Thinking it might be related to the synagogue, Amalia Daniele photographed it and forwarded it to David Cassuto, who provided a translation.⁹⁸

Amazed by the now cleansed Jewish quarter, Amalia Daniele tells us she then set off to give it new life. She transports us to 1999, the year she founded a cultural association called *Siracusa III Millennio*. In her mind, only culture could accomplish that goal. The lower part of this page contains a picture of the second inscription that was found.⁹⁹

She continues on by admitting she was so eager to share her findings with everyone, to pull the monument out of obscurity that, in September of 1999, in collaboration with Mosheh Ben Simon, Agostino Guccione, David Cassuto, Nicolò Bucaria, Amos Luzzato, Antonella Mazzamuto and Benedetto Carucci Viterbi, she organised the first international conference on the Jewish Baths of Siracusa. Below this page section are surveyed sketches of the Siracusa mikveh, drafted by Antonella Mazzamuto.¹⁰⁰

Moving on, she reveals that the best part of this entire discovery enterprise was when academics Angela Scandaliato and Nuccio Mulè got involved, going through archives and various documentation. In August of 2000, they found official proof that the church of San Giovanello had previously been the synagogue of the Giudecca. This find officially validated the popular theory that the other scholars were reticent to express without reliable support.

⁹⁴ Di Bagni, Amalia Daniele, 2016. p.24

⁹⁵ Di Bagni, Amalia Daniele, 2016. p.25

⁹⁶ The first discovery being the Jewish ritual baths under the palazzo and the second being the old Synagogue via San Giovanello's engraving.

⁹⁷ The diary does not mention when exactly or even where this inscription was found.

⁹⁸ Di Bagni, Amalia Daniele, 2016. p.25

⁹⁹ Di Bagni, Amalia Daniele, 2016. p.25

¹⁰⁰ Di Bagni, Amalia Daniele, 2016. p.26

The cultural association *Siracusa III Millennio* administered San Giovanello for four years, during which it was the epicentre of various cultural events such as exhibitions, plays, concerts, etc. This statement is immediately followed by a photograph of such an event inside the church structure.¹⁰¹ We can see three other pictures giving us insight into what these different events looked like in the following two diary pages.¹⁰²

Next, Amalia Daniele informs us that ‘Angela’ and ‘Nuccio’ kept rummaging through the archives so they could reconstruct Ortygia’s history. She accompanies this section with a sketch of a town map made by Nuccio Mulè, a representation of what the Jewish Quarter would have looked like in the early 15th century.¹⁰³

Once she knew the original names of the streets and alleys, Amalia Daniele had the old names reproduced and placed them herself all over the quarter, just below the signs with the contemporary names. She shares that while doing so, she contemplated the history associated with this place, the past that merciless individuals tried to erase. She concludes by expressing a negative view of the consequences of the Edict of expulsion of 1492, the moment that caused this area to change forever.¹⁰⁴

The third section of the diary is concise. Our author begins this new entry with the caption «... *ever a wanderer*».¹⁰⁵ Mostly, it consists of an array of historical compilations pertaining to an ancient Jewish presence in Sicily¹⁰⁶, explanations as to what a mikveh is and its meaning in Judaism as well as extrapolations on these specific spaces attributes.¹⁰⁷ It concludes with a brief summary relating to the Spanish rulers and their edict of expulsion in 1492.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰¹ Di Bagni, Amalia Daniele, 2016. p.27

¹⁰² Di Bagni, Amalia Daniele, 2016. p.28-29

¹⁰³ Di Bagni, Amalia Daniele, 2016. p.30

¹⁰⁴ Di Bagni, Amalia Daniele, 2016. p.31

¹⁰⁵ Di Bagni, Amalia Daniele, 2016. p.32

¹⁰⁶ Di Bagni, Amalia Daniele, 2016. p.32

¹⁰⁷ Di Bagni, Amalia Daniele, 2016. p.33

¹⁰⁸ Di Bagni, Amalia Daniele, 2016. p.34

The final section of the diary also contains many historical facts and reconstructions. The final entry «...*the history of the monuments of the Giudecca of Siracusa*»¹⁰⁹ is an appropriate caption to describe the following pages. Amalia Daniele carries forward from where she stopped in the previous section, detailing how, after the expulsion, the synagogue of Siracusa became a political tool while the mikveh was erased immediately. She informs us that it was in 1496 that the old synagogue was converted into a church dedicated to John the Baptist¹¹⁰. It remained in use as such until December 1865, when it was vacated. It was also during that same period, shortly after the Edict, that the Temple of Minerva (Siracusa) was transformed into a Cathedral, another victim of the mission to re-appropriate pagan places, according to our author. In 1890, the state took possession of the converted church. The building was deconsecrated, inventoried and then emptied. What follows is a succession of dates and various corresponding use of the space over the years, until 2012.¹¹¹ On the next page is a copy of what appears to be the inventory report previously mentioned.¹¹²

Next, Amalia Daniele initiates the topic of the church of San Filippo. The fact that San Filippo is also near the Jewish Baths and also comprises a private water hole has created some debate as to whether this was another ancient Jewish site. We are told, however, that Scandaliato solved the mystery of this question in one of her essay's, which Amalia Daniele quotes here. Scandaliato deduced that it was impossible for that building to have been a synagogue, despite its closeness to the other two Jewish buildings, since the church of San Filippo already existed, in the very location where it stands today, during the 15th century.¹¹³

Amalia Daniele explains that various notary acts, found by Scandaliato, dating from the latter half of the 15th century collaborate this deduction and identify San Giovanello as the synagogue of the Giudecca. Both institutions coexisted at the same time in the same place.¹¹⁴ The next page is dedicated to the photograph of one of these precious medieval notary

¹⁰⁹ Di Bagni, Amalia Daniele, 2016. p.35

¹¹⁰ In Italian; San Giovanni Battista.

¹¹¹ Di Bagni, Amalia Daniele, 2016. p.35&37

¹¹² Di Bagni, Amalia Daniele, 2016. p.36

¹¹³ Di Bagni, Amalia Daniele, 2016. p.37

¹¹⁴ Di Bagni, Amalia Daniele, 2016. p.38

documents.¹¹⁵ On the following pages, she mentions once more the many different modifications the Synagogue/San Giovanello church was subjected to, through the centuries, providing more details.¹¹⁶ The next page presents two different pictures, one of what appears to be San Giovanello being renovated, surrounded by scaffoldings. The other is a Hebrew inscription carved into stone.¹¹⁷

Our author resumes her story by sharing her opinion about the restoration procedures that the old synagogue underwent in recent years. Clearly displeased by the work done concerning the walls over the stones arches of the structure. She asks why would anyone remove these beautiful ancient walls, strong enough to have survived centuries of earthquakes, only to be replaced by bricks and ugly pink plaster. She also brings in question the treatment done to the Hebrew engraving on the wall of the apse. After quoting Scandaliato, once more, Amalia Daniele reveals that the cultural association *Siracusa III Millennio* is still responsible for the Jewish baths, a monument that attracts tourists and scholars from everywhere who are greeted by specialized guides. She goes on to reveal the current goals of the cultural association.¹¹⁸

Her last note, printed in bold letters, serves as her farewell statement. She, herself, admits to being arrogantly proud of her discoveries and her achievements. Due to her efforts, after centuries of intentional eradication, the Jewish History of Siracusa has been unlocked and recovered. In her belief, this history belongs to all. She has restored these sites to those who care and to those who aim to appreciate their faith and culture. She labels herself a “benevolent spectator” and comes full circle by ending her tale with a reference to the Madonna incident of her childhood. Despite her outsider status, she always held in high regard other people’s beliefs.¹¹⁹ On this last page, after our author’s goodbye note, can be found an acknowledgement section, a disclaimer about exterior financial aid, followed by the contact information for the cultural association *Siracusa III Millennio*.¹²⁰ The last four pages

¹¹⁵ Di Bagni, Amalia Daniele, 2016. p.39

¹¹⁶ Di Bagni, Amalia Daniele, 2016. p.40

¹¹⁷ Di Bagni, Amalia Daniele, 2016. p.41

¹¹⁸ Di Bagni, Amalia Daniele, 2016. p.42

¹¹⁹ Di Bagni, Amalia Daniele, 2016. p.43

¹²⁰ Di Bagni, Amalia Daniele, 2016. p.40

of the diary are dedicated to photographs of the underground Casa Bianca Mikveh, taken from different angles.

2.2.1. Breakdown

The critical importance of this diary cannot be understated. Within its pages reside's one of the historical constructs this thesis aspires to explore. This diary is a presentation, a unique piece of work that offers a behind the scenes look into the discovery of a monument of great cultural and historical significance. It also explores the story of the people and the environment surrounding it. However, this is not a set of assembled pages enumerating a series of uncontested facts accompanied by evidence to support them. This is an exhibition! Like most exhibitions, someone chose what to display. In other words, the author, who was undoubtedly at the centre of this construction process, made decisions as to what to say and what to silence.

Narratives exist in many forms, they are used to tell stories, but a narrative is as much an object as it is an undertaking.¹²¹ This diary is merely one of the channels via which a narrative about this mikveh is being circulated. In this case, we could consider this channel a work of literature as well as an attempt at historical writing. The American historian Hayden White once suggested that prominent 19th-century historians would shape their writings within templates belonging to literary genres, narrative genres.¹²² White was of the opinion that narratives were given a new meaning, allusions that they did not necessarily have on their own, through the process of shaping actual past events into an artificial narrative. He regarded this reshaping of authenticity an implied oppressive action.¹²³ Formulated like this, we cannot deny the severe implications these statements expose. Historical writings have often and for a long time been used as instruments of power. However, I do not wish to pursue this analysis into what could become some form of ideological criticism through the historical assessment of a narrative and its use. I only wish to bring attention to the constant question of duplexity between narratives and real events. White and many other authors deemed that human

¹²¹ Meister, J.C. (2009). p.331

¹²² Sometimes comedy, sometimes tragedy, and on occasion, even romance and satires. (Hayden White)

¹²³ Meuter, N. (2009). p.245

behaviour does not possess built-in narrative features; the encounters and experiences that later form a story is always told, never lived.¹²⁴ This diary recreates, in its own way, the history of the Jewish past of Ortygia.

2.2.1.1. The hero of her story

Throughout her diary, Amalia Daniele Di Bagni presents herself as the heroine of a fantastic tale. I say a tale because we can recognize many a theme that would be used in an adventure novel, for example. The next few pages will point out various themes and discuss them as they appear in no set chronological order.

Let us begin with a simple structural presence within the diary. Indeed, we can find the triadic structure of a beginning, middle and ending sequence that can be used in all forms of narrative work. It is usually thanks to pointed beginning and ending indicators that a story becomes purposeful, with the actions and events of the story resulting from one another instead of a simplified following of happenings without any deep-seated connection tying them to each other. When looked upon in its entirety, this creates a thrilling and captivating course of events from start to finish, one that encounters several obstacles and transitions.¹²⁵ As it would happen, one of the most consistent subject matter in Di Bagni's diary is hardship. A combination of arduous work and obstacles constantly impeding the progress of her quest. The following four citations illustrate my point.

«I bought the building bit by bit (countless mortgages still engulf me) because there were many different owners [...]»(Daniele, 2016, p.16).

«As we cleared out all the material in the room, we found an infinitely long staircase.»(Daniele, 2016, p.17).

«The cost was enormous, [...] unknown visitors continued to dump rubbish, cardboard and strange things like polystyrene wrappings. But my curiosity pushed me [...]»(Daniele, 2016, p.18).

¹²⁴ Meuter, N. (2009). p. 245-246

¹²⁵ Meuter, N. (2009). p.243

«I started to dig myself [...] It was painstaking work and I'd emerge from the basins full of water, almost paralysed with cold.»(Daniele, 2016, p.20).

Strongly linked to this notion of impediments to surmount is the notion of an enemy. A rival to hate, blame and eventually overcome. The presence of someone or something that is causing all these difficult trials. This too can be found throughout this narrative. For instance, when she shares; *«I felt a sense of anger towards the people of the quarter who were responsible for that desecration.»*(Daniele, 2016, p.25). Also, when she says; *«As I placed the old names by the new ones, I reflected; I could almost see those small-minded men, inhumane, as they rushed to erase the traces of a people who had lived there for centuries, [...]»*(Daniele, 2016, p.31).

It is vital that we take note of the way she presents herself in opposition to the enemy. Narrative content can be found in many fields. Some we could expect, others are more surprising. Psychoanalysis, for example, has discovered the usefulness of narrative in the study of psychology. It has developed conceptual interpretations that make use of narrative as more than just a source of information but also as a display. They consider narrative a form of self-presentation, but it is not only what is told that matters but also how it is communicated, as well as the performative side of the display. Analyzing the dramatics of narration, as well as style and content, would seem to them the best way to uncover a person true and inherent character.¹²⁶ So what can these passages from Amalia Daniele's diary tell us about the one who wrote them? After all, not only is her diary brimming with challenges to conquer; we also encounter a story touching the concepts of ownership, filled with demonstrations of love and care for the past. The next four citations substantiate this account.

«[...], I started to restore the place with sensitivity, careful not to change or wipe out the traces of the past, attentive to the original volumes of the place and restoring them where possible.»(Daniele, 2016, p.16).

«Once more, my love and attentive care for the place came to my aid.»(Daniele, 2016, p.21).

«Roofless, paving and doors missing, unloved, I had adopted this place, and had started to clean it, a bit like you nurse an abandoned puppy.»(Daniele, 2016, p.22).

¹²⁶ Meuter, N. (2009). p.248

«I was fascinated by the quarter, I'd cleared it of rubbish, now I wanted to give it a soul, or bring its soul back to life. In 1999 I founded the cultural association "Siracusa III Millennio", convinced that only culture could give a voice to such an important monument, make it known, bring it back to life, drag it out of the quicksands of abandon and ignorance.»(Daniele, 2016, p.25&26).

Via these selected citations, we can clearly understand that she not only feels that the baths belong to her but the entire Jewish quarter as well. She adopts it, emotionally as well as through her civic engagement. Here, we must also take note of her aspirations at remembrance and stopping erasure. This passage also brings forth a great deal of drama, of poetics, a vision of reviving the Jewish quarter all by herself.

Unsurprisingly, narratives can also be found as a research option in philosophical disciplines. Relevant to our situation would be those that handle questions of identity. Some thinkers have surmised that narration and identity are linked and that a person's individuality is composed and settled through storytelling. The practical, mental, physical and emotional components that make up the idea we have of ourselves, on which our personal identity is grounded, that image we carry is shown outwardly yet mirrored within us through narrative processes.¹²⁷

Another central idea perpetuated throughout this narrative is the concept of metamorphosis.

«The palazzo was beautiful despite being buried under rubbish and vandalised, preserving its fascination and its dignity. It was abandoned like the town quarter in which it stood [...]»(Daniele, 2016, p.14).

In this previous citation, Amalia Daniele describes for her readers a very negative aesthetic. Still, she mentions that she can see the potential residing under all the garbage. Already, she prepares us for the transformation to come.

«The whole quarter came back to life; houses, the hospital, the butchers' ... I grabbed the opportunity and had the old names printed on signs which I hung personally at the corners under the modern street name-plaques.»(Daniele, 2016, p.31).

¹²⁷ Meuter, N. (2009). p.250

In this passage, the idea of transformation no longer applies only to the palazzo under renovation. The change instigated has reached a new level and now extends to the entire Jewish quarter. Furthermore, we are made aware that it is not merely the physical aspects of the buildings and district that have shifted for the better but also the general atmosphere of the area. Additionally, once again, Amalia Daniele was personally involved at the core of the transformation. A transformation that seems almost supernatural, magical, striking.

«One can only ask -why? Those beautiful old walls had withstood centuries, and many earthquakes, and the new pink plaster is truly ugly.»(Daniele, 2016, p.40&42).

This particular example involving change testifies that she certainly has a clear idea about which phases, which aspects and historical timelines should be preserved and represented. Here, we observe a clear demonstration of this notion of choice we previously mentioned. Her personal aesthetic preferences are better suited to a specific architecture befitting a particular period. This implies that she believes one to have more value than the other, therefore making her politics of display public knowledge. As a matter of fact, her choice of favoured decor was quite evident to me during my visit to her remodelled hotel.

Our next main idea consists of the use of an exciting twist, what some people would call the element of surprise.

«Thinking about it one night (I always thought about it), I decided to investigate. [...] I made the discovery.»(Daniele, 2016, p.17).

This being the title she gave to her published work, a discovery cannot come as much of a surprise. Yet, an argument can be made to point out that this story consists of more than one discovery. However, whether it is one surprise or many, unforeseen or unknown events create memorable stories. Think of any famous movies. All the great ones have surprise twists.¹²⁸ Despite that, we all know those surprise tactics usually prove more useful with an alert and interested crowd. The suspense, anticipation and then the surprise keeps readers or viewers immersed in the story.

This we can also connect with the notion of a numinous revelation.

¹²⁸ 'The Matrix' or 'The Empire Strikes Back' to name but a couple with legendary reveals.

«I felt strangely excited by all this, but couldn't quite explain why, nor what the purpose of the room was, nor when to date it.»(Daniele, 2016, p.20).

The thrill of the discovery she mentions and the emotions involved remind me of Rudolf Otto's concept of the numinous. In this sentence, we can relate to an almost incoherent state of mind in reaction to an encounter with something that one cannot explain or understand. It is undoubtedly a testament to her thirst for knowledge and awareness and, in a way, much akin to this element of magic we witnessed earlier.

«And that's when I had the brainwave. I started an intense period of study looking for explanations, and in my old books I found some that talked about this place as a Jewish bath for purification [...]»(Daniele, 2016, p.21).

At times, the tale of this quest surrounding the Jewish baths can almost be compared to an epic adventure movie. One such as Laura Croft, a great treasure hunter on the trail of a new and exciting puzzle needing to be solved.

«Angela and Nuccio continued to follow the trail, like sniffer dogs, searching for and uncovering a mass of document and testimonies that gave them the information to reconstruct the old Jewish quarter; [...]»(Daniele, 2016, p.30).

However diligent she was on giving credit when credit is due, being compared to a dog is not the most flattering of comparisons. It also brings forward the theme of attitude. How does our author position herself in relation to academic authorities? It would appear that the discursive relationship she fosters towards them helps her establish herself as a distinct character.

2.2.1.2. Authorities

Throughout her diary, our author sometimes presents herself as an authority figure, as a specialist.

«I also found tiny oil lamps still stained with oil, easy to identify and there were smoke-stained niches in the walls.»(Daniele, 2016, p.20).

One might suggest that she may be slightly overly sure of her skills and capabilities. She admitted that she confidently tried to collect ancient and delicate pottery fragments in an attempt at reassembling the objects in whole, but to no avail. Moreover, her name, and by that I mean the addition of the affiliation “Di Bagni” which means ‘of the bath rooms’, could also be considered an attempt at establishing herself as an authority figure. In her own writings on Siracusa, its synagogue and ritual baths, Scandaliato refers to our author only as Amalia Daniele, which would imply that this is her real legal name. It is fascinating and very revealing that our author would choose the further link herself to the baths by giving herself an extra surname.¹²⁹

«From the studies by researchers, the year of construction cannot be [...]»(Daniele, 2016, p. 33).

Now, here we can take note of the distance to the academic community. It would appear that she refers to scholars and other individuals with a certain amount of influence when it is convenient to do so. She also relies, at times, on the expertise of others to reinforce her story, giving it supporting characters.

«Next I went to the Synagogue in Rome to ask for explanations, but didn't get any; however a few months later, two important figures of Jewish culture in the world turned up, Professor David Cassuto and Dr. Nicolò Bucaria, [...] These scholars brought others, many others, and we started visits, interviews and publications.»(Daniele, 2016, p.21).

Indeed, she appears to create a separate persona for herself via her relationships with academic authority figures.

«With the help of Mosheh Ben Simon and Agostino Guccione, and the collaboration of David Cassuto, Nicolò Bucaria, Amos Luzzato, Antonella Mazzamuto - who had in the meantime drawn up a survey of the Jewish Baths- and Benedetto Carucci Viterbi, in September 1999, we organised the first International Conference on the Jewish Baths of the Giudecca of Siracusa.»(Daniele, 2016, p.26&27).

¹²⁹ A majority of European last names can be traced back to medieval times. At their origin, given surnames were often associated to a person's job, nickname, birthplace, features, parentage combinations, reputation, etc.

Again, she uses academic authorities to bring more legitimacy to her own writing. However, unlike researchers that use their colleagues' publications or concepts to further a point, question it or reject it, Amalia Daniele appears to use her association with scholars to boost her own importance and expertise. She does so by sometimes hinting at a close relationship with these authority figures.¹³⁰ Other times, she tries to distance herself from them to adopt an individual stance. At this point, it is becoming evident that she is presenting herself as not only the hero of her story but as a cultural hero. She presents herself as the one to thank for giving voice to memories, to monuments of the past and an almost forgotten cultural heritage. This next citation is particularly representative of this fluctuating tendency.

«My thanks go to those whose writings enlightened me (which I quoted here) and who stood by me over the years [...]»(Daniele, 2016, p.43).

We might also point out that she seems to give her present publication, and therefore her story, experiences and findings, credit by affiliating them all to a cultural society she, herself, established.

«All the activities of clearing and cleaning the sites described here were carried out by the association “Siracusa III Millennio”, without any public assistance or funding.»(Daniele, 2016, p.43).

She founded this organization, it is hers, or once was, if that is no longer the case, but we are not told much about this group other than a few important dates and its mission. Amalia Daniele, throughout her journey, has received expert help many times, for translations, surveys and such. Regardless, the diary adopts the word ‘I’ repetitively when it comes to arduous cleanup tasks or financing.

Unrelated to the discovery, she also takes one last opportunity to share with us the great and benevolent work she is involved in.

«In the immediate future of “Siracusa III Millennio”, we’re creating a bursary for university theses dedicated to new Jewish discoveries, we’re creating a museum for local history, and a literary prize for works that have a Jewish theme.»(Daniele, 2016, p.42).

¹³⁰ For example: when Amalia Daniele refers to them via their first names, expressing some form of familiarity.

More than the illustrated representation of the mikveh or the Giudecca, this new instance is very revealing of the way she presents herself to the world, unknowingly or not. It is also very telling of her hopes for the future of Jewish representation in Syracuse.

2.2.1.3. Respect

This brings us to the question of why? Why is she doing this? As we are told, at the beginning of her diary, she truly believes this was her destiny, that she was chosen. The capacity to connect and learn from the diversity of people around us is a trait called ‘cultural responsibility’. It is an attitude, a lifestyle, that consists of exploring, as well as respecting, other peoples differences. In this next citation, this trait is clearly exhibited.

«But one thing is unchanged in me; a profound respect for the feelings of others, for the faith of others.»(Daniele, 2016, p.11).

This is quite a contemporary sentiment. It would appear that this is the way she would like to be recognized. Be it by the generations to come or the generations of today. She projects to the world the message that she is not like the ones that came before. She is not critical, racist or intolerant. She is accepting, gracious, curious and generous, willing to do what is necessary to make things right.

«I started to explore a world I'd never studied before, and I was keen to know more and to understand it.»(Daniele, 2016, p.21).

Through this narrative, Amalia Daniele’s character embodies respect and curiosity towards the ‘Other’, towards the stranger so foreign to her own background. A rare quality to be found in that part of the world where, historically, tolerance towards diversity has not often been a prominent attitude.¹³¹ Yet another indicator that the overall environment in Siracusa, Sicily, is changing.

¹³¹ Ariella Bankier’s article “Still Jewish After All These Years” confirms that some fear, linked to these prejudices towards Jews, still lingers today in the south of Italy. For many families, keeping their true heritage a secret is what kept them alive for centuries. Letting go of these fears is no small thing. (Bankier, 2010)

2.2.1.4. Essence

It is at the very end of her diary, within her farewell statement, that we can find a cluster of all the thematics we just observed.

«I am immensely happy and immodestly proud to have discovered these two sites, after centuries of deliberate oblivion and systematic destruction of all traces, and to have reopened a chapter of history that belongs to all of us. I have returned these monuments to all those who love them, and who try to understand their culture and their faith. Once again, life has made me a benevolent yet attentive spectator; a bit like the times of the Madonna/Mona Lisa, when I could never quite join in completely, but admired and religiously respected the beliefs of others.»(Daniele, 2016, p.43).

We recognize the idea of ‘respect’, which we have just discussed, as well as the different concepts surrounding the idea of discovery. New and crucial to us is the reflection on silenced history. What the diary tells us is that this discovery, in all its glory, allows for a new beginning, a new age, where truth and knowledge are prioritized, and prejudice and fear are pushed aside. This is a story of love for the ‘Other’, the different. It is a narrative that suggests an image of a victimized historic Jewish community and the traces that remain of their culture.

2.2.1.5. Wrap up

Through the analysis of this diary we observe several themes. Notions of respect, reflections on authority figures, ways of portraying self-image, etc. Mostly, since this is a narrative produced by a specific individual, it allows us to recognize the specificity and need of this personal standpoint. It would seem Amalia Daniele’s perspective on the Jewish past stems from a business position. Of course, this makes sense. As the owner of the mikveh, she controls it and she has the possibility to promote a message of her choice. The way she portrays herself as a tolerant character embracing the Other, is linked to the way she portrays the Jewish past through the mikveh. She promotes this image of a nostalgic past, of a victimized community in order to support her benevolent care taking role. The more it seems these monuments need her care, the more her persona seems selfless and accepting. By

perpetuating the claim that these sites need help, devotion, a caring hand to brush off the trauma of abandonment, the more she consolidates her claim of ownership over them. This unprejudiced identity that she puts forth several times can also help separate her from others who claim ownership over symbolic treasures outside of their own culture. She deliberately separates herself from the wrong doers of this storyline, the ones that took over these Jewish sites to erase them. In complete opposition, she presents her efforts and her appropriation of these sites as restorative and good.

2.3. *The Giudecca*

Siracusa, to me, seemed every bit alike any other little old town I have visited in Europe. Busy and quiet, modern and old, warm and cold, commercial and residential, unique and mainstream; every part of the small island of Ortigia was, or rather, is a magnificent contradiction.

The first field research steps I undertook in Siracusa led me to scout the *Residence hotel Alla Giudecca* and the mikveh underneath.

3D Map of Ortigia





Street signs entering the Jewish Quarter



Street sign on the cross street of the Casa Bianca mikveh ('ancient road of the bath')

Front right façade of the Residence hotel Alla Giudecca



Front left façade/entrance of the Residence hotel Alla Giudecca
Including the affiche announcing the Jewish baths (Bagno Ebraico)



To my surprise, the venue was not hard to find, despite the labyrinth of small streets one needs to navigate. The guidebook I was using, *The Rough Guide to Sicily*¹³², came in handy to locate the monument. A three-dimensional map of the district, as well as a few street signs, can be found at the perimeter of the old Jewish quarter to help guide people in the general direction of the Jewish baths.

The Jewish aspect of the area was rather well advertised in contrast to other famous landmarks in the city. Once next to the hotel, it is impossible to be lost. The hotel front itself is assaulted by signs indicating you have found the right place.

I did not enter or see the Jewish baths upon my first visit. Instead choosing to have several informal conversations with tourists exiting the hotel. I briefly explained the purpose of my presence and my main research interest¹³³ and obtained their permission to ask them questions about their impressions of the tour and the mikveh itself.

My first conversation was with subject “B”, a non-Jewish American filmmaker. Subject B described the mikveh as two baths. To him, the underground chambers had felt ceremonial, filled with sacredness. He saw this place as both a communal place for women, traditional and mystifying in comparison to solitary spaces on the sides. He was told by the guide that the hollow had been carved out of the rock by hand and that the water was flowing water, ever changing. He mentioned he was fascinated by faith, by devotion, by the Bible. Today, monuments such as these are echos of a lost history and should be revered. He was in awe at the tangibility of such a place, a physical demonstration of a city, a place, a native community. When I asked him what images the mikveh evoked in him, his first thought was for cleanliness, associated with nakedness. He also wondered about the possibility of spectators due to the presence of benches built into the walls around the pools. When asked for his impressions of the actual guided visit, he admitted he considered it under-guided, it could easily be more informative.

Towards the end of my conversation with subject B, a man and woman, a non-Jewish Dutch couple on vacation, excited to hotel. They had also just visited the baths, and so I also

¹³² Belford, R.(2017).

¹³³ To ascertain the relationship between material culture (archaeological remains) and the use of this heritage.

asked them to share their impressions with me. They described the hollow as having high ceilings and arches but small gateways(doors) that had to be ducked. They also mentioned a Greek well, not included in the same category as the Jewish basins, and three main pools. The water in the pools looked deep and the entire cave had an echo sound. They were amazed by the place and impressed by the purity it conveyed. They were aware rituals use to take place in such venues and that that is the reason they required pure water. They were surprised not to find text engravings, in Hebrew, on the walls and such. They described the ancient Jewish community as being different from the rest of the population. Therefore, to them, it was perfectly logical that they would have had their own special moments and events, objects and places related to their own people. They knew that the underground baths had been hidden for a long time. They felt a mystical quality attached to it. They assumed it must have looked quite different once, perhaps covered with tiles in some areas.

On my second visit to the Jewish baths of Siracusa, I planned on visiting the mikveh myself. I travelled back to the hotel and ventured into the gifts and souvenirs store located within the complex, on the opposite side of the reception area. The guided tours of the mikveh, a sign on the door informed me, only occurred every 30 minutes for a few hours in the morning and the afternoon. It also stated that the tour was available for a price of 5 euros per person.

While I waited for the next tour, I engaged in conversation with the receptionist, whom we will call subject "J". Subject J is a young non-Jewish Sicilian woman who made it clear to me that she only worked in the hotel part of the complex. Aside from the baths being attached to the hotel, she has no tasks associated to the mikveh. Regardless, she told me she feels that the historical heritage of the place is very important to her and her colleagues. It is important for everyone but especially for the Jews. She even compared this mikveh's level of importance to the Vatican for Catholics. She feels lucky to work in such an environment. Even though the hotel is only marked three stars, she feels much better surrounded by such historical culture than if she worked in a five stars resort with no character. In her opinion, historical culture belongs to everyone and the Sicilian Jews' past is very different, private and quiet. On the subject of the Jews religious beliefs, she revealed to me that she thinks they are an amazing and important people; quiet, intelligent, only caring about their souls and only

seeking a good environment to live in. It was unclear if she was referring to the Jews of the past, of today or both.¹³⁴

When the tour guide arrived, I purchased my 'ticket' for the tour, cash only, and then waited for her to begin. It being low season, on a 'week' day and in the early afternoon, I was the only person on this particular tour. My guide was yet another young Sicilian woman. She took me to the end of the corridor, in the hotel courtyard, where she opened a side door. We passed through a large open conference room, connected to the boutique. She moved quickly as she informed me that I was not permitted to take any pictures in the underground hallow. We passed through another small courtyard. This one was also open to the elements and held a rather large and old looking grey stoned well. We then proceeded down an ancient looking staircase.

At the bottom of the stone steps, 18 metres underground, two meters below sea level, lay a large sculpted cave with wide arches. The room was square shaped with built-in benches along most of the walls, and two open doorways leading to side chambers. In the middle of the main room, on the floor, slightly to the left of the stairs, lay three pools carved into the bedrock and shaped like pentagons. Positioned as they are, all tips converging together, they resemble an incomplete four cloverleaf structure. Next to the three central pools can be found the 'Greek' well previously mentioned. The well, compared to the other basins, is encompassed with modern technology. The guide informs me that a modern pump was installed to evacuate the overflow of water.

The rock floor is covered in water puddles and very muddy, a result of the heavy storm Siracusa suffered a couple of days before. Once down the stairs, my tour guide had positioned herself near one of the four wide columns in the room and started to recite a rehearsed speech. She informs me that the water source flowing through the pools is fresh water originating from an underwater river, not salt water. She explains that they know for a fact that the hollow is Jewish in origin because of public records. Flood stains, humidity and time damage, are noticeable everywhere I look. The arches that converge above the three central basins seem to

¹³⁴ Towards the end of my conversation with subject J, an older female tourist appearing to be eastern or central European came into the hotel and complained to the receptionist that the place was very hard to find and far away from the parking area. She left and did not return in time for the tour I joined. It would seem not everyone would agree on the level of accessibility of the attraction.

have suffered burns and smoke damage. I suspect it was where they placed an oil lamp to be able to see. Today, of course, the entire cave is wired with electrical lamps, but some corners are still dark and obscure. I save the side rooms for last. They are small, private, adjoining bathing chambers, both accessed through a medium sized doorway also carved in the rock. However, these pools have been sculpted in the shape of rectangles and not pentagons like the basins in the main room. The side chambers are on opposite sides of the large central room, yet they seem similar in dimension and use. All five Jewish basins have stone steps to allow an individual to carefully submerge themselves, though some steps look much newer than others. Two rather large cavities (seemingly incomplete tunnels leading up to the surface), can be found in different places in the underground hollow. One is located next to a basin in one of the adjoining rooms, and the other can be found on the wall, across from the staircase, next to the entry of the other adjoining chamber. My guide informs me that these cavities are believed to be unfinished attempts at digging more basins.

Later on, the guide shared with me her excitement for her job. In her perception, this place is filled with history, which she enjoys. Towards the end of the tour, I tried to question her some more, specifically about the allegations that rabbi DiMauro had utilized this place in recent years for conversion ceremonies.¹³⁵ Unfortunately, she knew nothing about it and did not even know who DiMauro was. At the time, I concluded that the cause of her ignorance was because she had been working as a tour guide in the mikveh for only two months. She suggested I return another day at another time to question her colleagues. I did return, on several occasions, yet every-time I returned, only she was working. Despite her slight reluctance to answer my questions, she allowed me extra time to inspect the underground rooms at my leisure, under her continued supervision.

2.3.1. San Filippo

The church of San Filippo is mentioned in Amalia Daniele's diary. We are told that its proximity to the baths and the ancient synagogue, as well as the existence of a subterranean well underneath the structure, ushered some debates as to its involvement in Jewish history. However, we are also told that Angela Scandaliato swiftly silenced those discussions. Due to

¹³⁵ This particular subject will be discussed further in the second part of this thesis's analysis section.

the fact that the same church existed in the 15th century, she posits this could not have been a synagogue.¹³⁶

When I finally entered this building I had passed numerous times on my way to the mikveh; I came upon Father Flavio, the parish priest. I introduced myself and revealed my interest in viewing the catacombs. Father Flavio told me to return next Monday morning for a full visit with one of his volunteers. However, he took some time right then and there to inform me there were actually three Jewish baths on Ortygia. The first, the Casa Bianca mikveh, I already knew about. The second was under his church. The third, he informed me, was located inside a

private residence.¹³⁷ Father Flavio was the first and only local resident to inform me of the presence of three possible mikva'ot on the small island. He also assured me there was absolutely no 'human' Jewish presence left in the area, just in name. Overall, he described Siracusa as a place of many contradictions.

I arrived promptly, on the last Monday morning of my field research, for a visit of the hidden treasures underneath San Filippo. The 1700's crypt, as well as the ancient Greek tunnels, were fascinating but it was the third layer of ruins that were genuinely fascinating. Eighteen metres underground, tapping into the same water source as the Arethusa Fountain as well as the Jewish baths under the Residence hotel Alla Giudecca, merely a road away, was



Poster advertisement found on the San Filippo church doors for visits to the three underground levels of the Giudecca (the Jewish quarter), under the church.

¹³⁶ Di Bagni, Amalia Daniele, 2016. p.37

¹³⁷ To my great regret, even with the help of father Flavio and his volunteer who contacted the owner of the private residence for me, the owner would not make an exception to his 'no visit' rule, even for an academic research project.



what appeared to be a small submerging pool carved through the rock. Its original structure and shape seemed to be intact, and one can see steps leading into the water to facilitate access.

Third subterranean level, spiral staircase leading to the San Filippo stepped pool. Anonymous tourist descending.



Submerged steps leading into the San Filippo subterranean pool.



Underground opening to subterranean levels of San Filippo, at the entrance of the church. Father Flavio in the back.

The well underneath San Filippo is advertised as a mikveh by the church administration which manages the structure. A partial Jewish inscription carved into the rock near the underground basin can be found along the long spiral staircase leading down to it from the church. It would appear there are some inconsistencies within the stories shared about this historic building. To this thesis, truth is not as important as representation. Whether the San Filippo subterranean well is another genuine Jewish purification bath or not is of no consequence to us at this time.¹³⁸ It is advertised as such and believed to be a Jewish site by the people in charge of its management and by the tourists that enjoy the free guided tours they provide, marking it as yet another narrative illustrating the Jewish past of Siracusa. We could also add that it is clearly marked as a Jewish place, quite literally claimed through a Hebrew word carved into the underground stone wall; a partial Jewish inscription that could be a name.¹³⁹

I have included this place in my observations of Jewish historical representations in Syracuse because it is important to point out that it is thought to be one by the public. Even though it is still very much an epicenter of Christian dominion and despite the fact that it not officially recognized as a historical Jewish space by scholarship, it remains a strong ‘on site’ narrative of enacted Jewish presence.

2.4. Mediated Jewish self-representation

When I first began researching ancient Jewish ritual baths around Europe, I found, online, several magazines and newspaper articles about the Casa Bianca mikveh and its discovery. Most of these articles did not originate from academic research journals but rather from independent newspapers. Seemingly, since the year 2010, these articles had become increasingly popular¹⁴⁰. This growing popularity would appear to have been directly linked to

¹³⁸ However, I feel compelled to once again refer to Mulè and Scandaliato’s conclusions on the subject, which were specified in the literary review of this thesis.

¹³⁹ An official translation has of yet been impossible. Consulted experts are uncertain, partly due to the quality of the photos. More research may be required. The first three letters read אִשֶּׁר. This may be interpreted as the name “Asher.” The fourth, fifth and sixth letters are unclear. The fourth may be a Heth, the fifth a Pe and the last one might be a Yodh or a final Nun. (Monger & Elgrin & Langlois)

¹⁴⁰ By ‘popular’ I mean the climbing amount of articles on the subject, as well as the number of likes and reads these various stories received. For example, in September 2018, our third media sample, which you will see shortly, had already been read 14513 times according to its post information. (<http://www.timesofsicily.com/>)

a growing social phenomenon; a Jewish revival movement happening all over the south of Italy. Some dated the revival to the discovery of the ancient mikveh on Ortygia. In the next few pages, I will introduce samples of the different mediated representation of Jewish heritage that have been circulating in recent years and analyze them to discover how they relate to the Casa Bianca mikveh. What role does the mikveh play within these different narratives? What purpose do these references to the mikveh have within these media representations?

2.4.1. Sample 1

Our first sample is a newspaper article titled «Coming home after 500 years»¹⁴¹ published by the Jewish Standard in September 2011. According to their official website, in the section “About Us”¹⁴² the Jewish Standard presents itself as an independent American newspaper committed to the Jewish continuity. They proclaim they have been the ‘Jewish voice’ of Northern New Jersey since 1931. The article was authored by Alex Weisler, who, according to his LinkedIn account, was, at the time, a freelance reporter.¹⁴³

Visually, the article begins with a picture of Rabbi Stefano di Mauro. In the backdrop of the picture, we see a set of green curtains, embroidered onto them is the star of David, in bright orange-red. Underneath the picture, Weisler presents Di Mauro as the man responsible for setting up a new but tiny Jewish community in the south of Sicily. A community that is composed and welcomes Jewish scions trying to reconnect with Judaism.¹⁴⁴ This article seems to centre itself around a broadcast of a conference that, according to the author, took place the week prior to his publication. This gathering, as Weisler calls it, was the “first-of-its-kind”¹⁴⁵ and was intended for the people possibly returning to the Jewish faith, the descendants of the Jews that were forced to convert during what our author associates to the Inquisition era. The article contributes several testimonies from five different people who assert they either sense their Jewish roots or hope for them. For some of them, however,

¹⁴¹ Weisler, A. (2011)

¹⁴² ABOUT US. (n.d). Retrieved March 12, 2019, from the Jewish Standard website: <https://jewishstandard.timesofisrael.com/about/>

¹⁴³ (Weisler, n.d.)

¹⁴⁴ Weisler, A. (2011)

¹⁴⁵ Weisler, A. (2011)

reclaiming their Jewish identity has developed into a source of hardship due to the strong Catholic disposition of their kin. The reference to the Casa Bianca mikveh can be found within the first few lines. After delivering Salvatore Zurzolo's 20 years arduous campaign towards conversion story, our author mentions that Zurzolo finally and officially converted to Judaism, in December 2010, by immersing in the ancient baths of Siracusa. Weisler mentions the baths site once more, in passing, mentioning they are located underneath an up and coming hotel.¹⁴⁶ It also seems implied that the conference took place within this hotel.

This piece of writing may not be very long, but several points of issue can be extracted from its contents.¹⁴⁷ What is truly interesting to us is the culmination of Zurzolo's conversion tale.

«Finally, last December, Zurzolo formally converted to Judaism with a dip in the ancient mikvah of Siracusa, [...]»(Weisler, 2011).

The author tells us that this Zurzolo, a southern Italian native, was told his family was Jewish when his grandmother revealed the secret just before her death. For 20 years he tried to convert but was not permitted to do so by the Jewish authorities in Rome. Over the years, he visited Israel numerous times, wore the star of David proudly around his neck as well as a kippah, he kept kosher and never gave up his ambition to be true to his 'heritage'. What this statement tells us is that despite living Jewishly for so long, none of these things made him Jewish. Only once he submerged himself, as is tradition, in a mikveh, was his conversion made legitimate. Furthermore, this was not just any mikveh; this was an ancient one, a breathing heirloom, an heirloom that is helping an entire community rediscover its past. Whether the story bears truth or not does not matter. Whether he truly utilized these ancient baths or not does not matter. The mere fact that these baths are used as a symbol of legitimacy is telling enough.

¹⁴⁶ Weisler, A. (2011)

¹⁴⁷ I would also like to posit that it is unclear to the reader whether the reporter attended this conference or not. In some sections, from the direct testimonies he provides, one would believe he was there, but in other sections, where he is quite vague about the actual conference, one can think he is merely commenting on an event he heard about and researched. Also, perhaps not as important an issue as others, he never mentions the language these proceedings take place in. One would assume, since we happen to be in Siracusa, Sicily, that everything would happen in Italian. Hebrew could be another possibility considering the specific community we are discussing. However, the article, most likely due to its intended audience of North-American Jews, is in English. The question remains, nevertheless, that all the quotes and testimonies shared by the author are in English. Were they translated, if so by whom? All attempts at communicating with the author have come to nought.

The ancient mikveh can also be interpreted as a valid argument to the historical claim this article seems to introduce. I refer to the title of this article, «*Coming home after 500 years*»¹⁴⁸, which is also very telling. It claims ownership. It claims belonging. I believe this to be our author's main argument. Home is where the heart is. Have we not all heard that saying? Home is a place where we live, a residence. It can be a refuge of sorts. Homes may be associated to living quarters where we prepare food, sleep and so on, but they are not restricted to that. They do not have a set number of residents associated to them. Tribes, individuals, families, couples may have homes. A homestead provides what its residents need and also usually include's the facilities required to deliver those needs, for example, a mikveh. Homes can be more than places. In this instance, we have a perfect example of that; home seems to imply a specific geographic area; Siracusa. This statement not only sets a claim on the area, but it also indicates that this is a return. They have a historical right to that claim; «*Sicily had a Jewish population of at least 50,000 at the time of the Inquisition, [...]*»(Weisler, 2011).

In the article, Jewish presence in Siracusa is presented as being new, yes, but also as being merely the beginning.

«*“The next step is to create a permanent beit din” [religious court] for the south and give the opportunity to the ones who want to come back to Judaism to be helped faster;” he said.*»(Weisler, 2011).

This statement is a quote from Rabbi Di Mauro, and it implies that he, at least, has a plan, a future, for this community he is leading. It also implies that he is needed, that enough people wish to return to the faith, that the community will grow. The implication that the community is present and only getting stronger is also collaborated by the announcement that «*[...] Siracusa has a synagogue again [...]*».(Weisler, 2011). The presence of the Rabbi, as well as his position as leader of this new community, also suggests that the situation is well in hand, under management, by some form of authority, which gives it legitimacy.

The different personal testimonies brought forth are also quite intriguing, unique yet related. Weisler mentions what he noticed from the various 'discovery' stories shared at the

¹⁴⁸ Weisler, A. (2011)

gathering, he says: «*The narrative varied by individual, but the gist was the same: There was a gut feeling, an inescapable, always-known truth, with or without the evidence to back it up.*»(Weisler, 2011).

The multiple witnesses share this current of valued secret Jewishness Weisler presents in his article. He attests that Zurzolo had been “flirting” with Judaism long before his grandmother’s deathbed confession of their family’s ‘real’ status. Another interviewee, Elisabetta, has no concrete proof of her Jewish ancestry, Weisler reveals she travelled from Rome to attend the conference.¹⁴⁹ Her quote is rather straightforward: «*“Being 60, it’s my right to die like a Jew. That’s it, [...] It’s my feeling, my link, my faith”.*»(Weisler, 2011). Another participant, Maria, also travelled some way to attend the conference and Weisler shares that she too has no undeniable proof of Jewish blood. Yet, she confessed that she would feel better should she find out for sure she is, indeed, Jewish.¹⁵⁰ Weisler also discloses young Carlo’s story. Carlo knows of his Jewish roots but also dreamt them as a child. We are told that he did not want to reveal his last name because his typical Sicilian Catholic family resents his new spiritual path. The last individual story our author imparts in his text is Beatrice’s. She had recently uncovered her Jewish heritage and «*[...] has since taken to keeping kosher and attending synagogue [...]*»(Weisler, 2011).

The self-identity perception disclosed by these testimonies reveals an underlying communal determination. They all believe, they want, therefore, they are. These stories present an image of the new Jews of Syracuse as craving their Jewish status, as needing it. Pious, pure, law-full, tenacious and willing to go against the dominant Catholic climate to be true to themselves. They appear as ideal types.

This also conveys an image of conversion as being, not only accepted but promoted. Even Rabbi di Mauro is revealed to be a convert.¹⁵¹ In addition, the fact that the majority of the shared testimonies come from women demonstrates a rather liberal world view, a trend not often found within very conservative factions of Judaism. This more or less confirms the

¹⁴⁹ Weisler, A. (2011)

¹⁵⁰ Weisler, A. (2011)

¹⁵¹ Weisler, A. (2011)

liberal-leaning of this new community. The fact that this is thus advertised could indicate that this is the way they wish to be recognized.

The gathering in itself, the background of the article, also confirms another of our previously discussed themes; growth. Indeed, this gathering seems to confirm that the phenomenon of returning Jews has reached a certain level of importance, important enough to attract the attention of influential people and officials in the International Jewish community. For example, Weisler reveals to us that the conference « [...] brought together a passel of prominent Italian rabbis [...] »(Weisler, 2011). Also, he mentions that «*It marked the first time that the Union of Italian Jewish Communities, or UCEI, the umbrella group of the Italian Jewish establishment, offered formal recognition and support.*»(Weisler, 2011).

« *“For Rabbi Piperno to come from Rome, it shows that we’re getting stronger,” [...]* »(Weisler, 2011).

Listing the names of various notable attendees and powerful officials, including the esteemed Michael Freund, the chairman and founder of the Shavei Israel Foundation, certainly implies that this conference, inaugural as it may have been, was noteworthy and a demonstration of expansion. So, the significance of the gathering was highlighted but so was the prospects of the phenomenon. Already implied in their hopes for the future, the growing size of the phenomenon, and, therefore, the community itself, was also accentuated. It was there to stay and prosper.

« *Sicily now has its first rabbi in 500 years, and Siracusa’s tiny one-room synagogue - occupying the bottom floor of an apartment building in the city’s outskirts and drawing from a revolving population of about 40 interested locals - is one of only two or three Jewish communities in Italy south of Naples.* »(Weisler, 2011).

The last part of that sentence also brings forward the theme of rarity. Not only is this revival phenomenon meaningful, important and growing, but it is also a fantastic oddity. It is presented as an accomplishment, and perhaps we could even go as far as calling it a miracle.

Our last relevant theme is linked to this idea of a miracle.

« “I’m not so young anymore to get so excited, but it seems like God wants this to happen. So many things are coming together.” »(Weisler, 2011).

This is one of the many quotes from di Mauro that Weisler shares in his article. This narrative is strong; the image being brought forth supports all of the other themes. If God wants this, then all of their actions, goals and efforts are justified. This phenomenon transforms itself into a spiritual quest from God.

Thus, in a nutshell, throughout this article, Jewish presence in Siracusa is shown as being in good hands. Jewish identity is presented as being a valued secret starting to break through. The new community of Siracusa is advertised as being a phenomenon of growing importance. It is also laid out as being a rarity, but an oddity that has a future and is God’s plan. Siracusa is delineated as a historical home where loyal and determined converts are aided and welcomed.

What’s more, all of this is linked directly to the ancient mikveh, and not only because of its function in Zurzolo’s conversion. This important gathering is taking place in the hotel that resides above these ancient baths. Let us remind ourselves that this conference was aimed at ‘returning Jews’, by using this important location, Jewish descendants are literally invited to come home.

2.4.2. Sample 2

Our second sample consists of an article entitled «*Sicily’s Ancient Jewish Presence Revived With Discovery of Europe’s Oldest Mikveh*». ¹⁵² Found within the archaeology section, it was published in June 2014 through the online version of Haaretz Israeli Newspaper. Haaretz advertises as an independent news website with a liberal attitude and millions of readers. The website covers a wide net of subjects, from global and local news and opinions to analysis on the politics in the Middle East, International relations and more. ¹⁵³ The author of this article, Giovanni Frazzetto, according to the Conville & Walsh website ¹⁵⁴, a UK based international

¹⁵² Frazzetto, G. (2014).

¹⁵³ Accessibility. (n.d)

¹⁵⁴ Giovanni Frazzetto. (n.d).

literary agency, is a renowned author. Born and raised in Sicily, he now lives in Ireland and holds a PhD in molecular biology. Professionally, he enjoys a cross-disciplinary approach and loves to connect literature, art and science. He has written for a wide variety of international magazines and newspapers, including Haaretz, the Huffington Post, Financial Times, etc.¹⁵⁵

The article begins with a statement; «*In January 2013, for the first time in more than 500 years, Syracusans listened to their rabbi read the Book of Esther.*»(Frazzetto, 2014). This sentence is immediately followed by a picture of the main chamber of the Jewish ritual baths of Syracuse; the image is credited to Amalia Daniele di Bagni. What follows can be divided into four sections. First comes the introductory sections where our author presents what the article is about. Starting with a little bit of geography and history, he placed the presence of the Jews in Sicily from the first century of the common era up to their expulsion in the 15th century.¹⁵⁶

The author introduces the second section through a bold lettering subtitle: «*An ancient Jewish presence*».¹⁵⁷ Here, he quickly describes Ortygia and the Jewish quarter of the island and supplies several historical examples of Jewish presence there, such as medieval tombstones, the star of David carved into Gothic structures and the existence of a Hebrew inscription on a wall cranny of what was once a synagogue. Then, he presents the discovery, in 1987, of the ancient underground mikveh on Ortygia. He reveals its finding to be a happy accident due to challenging renovation works. He depicts the mikveh carved in stone, giving physical details of its five immersion pools and its perfect state of conservation. Frazzetto then concludes this part by hypothesizing as to the reason why the baths were buried, most likely to preserve them from Christian interference after the Edict of Expulsion.¹⁵⁸

The third section is also announced through a bold lettering subtitle: «*Coming back to life*».¹⁵⁹ Here, Frazzetto opens up about the Jewish community in Syracuse today. He announces that the discovery of the baths set in motion a new beginning for the dormant

¹⁵⁵ Giovanni Frazzetto. (n.d).

¹⁵⁶ Frazzetto, G. (2014)

¹⁵⁷ Frazzetto, G. (2014)

¹⁵⁸ Frazzetto, G. (2014)

¹⁵⁹ Frazzetto, G. (2014)

society. Now, they have a new leader, Rabbi Di Mauro, who moved back to Sicily in 2007. Di Mauro has committed himself to bring Judaism back to life in Sicily and Syracuse. This information is then followed by a quote from Di Mauro himself about his mission of helping people rediscover their heritage. Frazzetto informs us that even though a majority of Jews left after the Edict, some of those who decided to stay and were forced to become Christians covertly kept some of their customs alive. People have recently found out that some of the habits they observe, passed down through generations, are actually Jewish. Rituals like covering mirrors while grieving, which is a shiva¹⁶⁰ practice. Lighting candles on Friday for Shabbat and spring cleaning for Easter are other examples of forgotten secret Jewish customs that have recently been brought to light. Our author goes on to reveal that the current Jewish community of Syracuse is not sizeable, but they are solid and even have a new Synagogue on via Italia. He also shares that Rabbi Di Mauro has celebrated marriages and conversions, some were even performed in the ancient mikveh. This section concludes with another quote from Di Mauro, confessing that his community might be small but that it is growing; the best part for him, as a leader, is the opportunity to help.¹⁶¹

The fourth and final part is once again presented via a bold letter subtitle: «*Regaining 'ownership' of 'Purim Katan'*».¹⁶² Frazzetto undertakes this section by stating that Di Mauro is also responsible for restoring the celebration of a second Purim in the region.¹⁶³ This particular Purim Katan was, for a long time, associated to the city of Saragossa, Spain.¹⁶⁴ Our

¹⁶⁰ In Judaism, Shiva is the third of five stages of mourning. It is associated with a ritual called 'sitting shiva' which broadly consists of a seven days mourning period affecting direct family relatives.

¹⁶¹ Frazzetto, G. (2014)

¹⁶² Frazzetto, G. (2014)

¹⁶³ Second Purim, which can also be called Purim katan, is similar to, but does not replace, the original Jewish holiday of Purim. It is celebrated on the anniversary of the day that a particular community or individual was rescued... Throughout the course of history, Jewish communities all over the world established locally rooted purims to commemorate their own deliverance from calamity and/or an antisemitic law or oppressor.

¹⁶⁴ According to JewishEncyclopedia.com, under "PURIMS, SPECIAL" the Purim of Saragossa originated in the year 1380 or 1420, under Peter IV or under Alfonso V, King of Aragon. The story is very similar to the one recounted to us by Giovanni Frazzetto. A converted Jew called Marcus went to the king and accused the Jews of Saragossa of purposefully removing the Torah scrolls from their cases, which were being displayed during a parade held in honour of the king. This was true, the rabbis of the city had ordered the scrolls to be removed because of religious scruples. On Marcus's suggestion, the king ordered the cases to be opened in the street during the next parade. Miraculously, the prophet Elijah appeared in the dreams of the guardians of the twelve synagogues and warned them to place the Torah books back into their cases. When the king visited next, his guards opened the cases and stated that no treachery had been exercised. Angry, the king ordered Marcus to be hanged. To commemorate this miraculous event, the descendants of the Jews of Saragossa honour this Purim on the 17th or 18th of Shebat.

author informs us that historians have lately realized that this particular Purim emanates from Siracusa. Therefore, in January 2013, for the first time since they were expelled from the territory, Sicilian Jews, in their new synagogue, heard their rabbi read from the scroll (megillah) describing the particular events that led to their local story of deliverance. Frazzetto goes on to recount the tale which happened not long before the expulsion, under the reign of Aragon King Martin I. He shares that, according to legend, for twelve years in a row, whenever the king would visit the Jewish quarter, a cortege of religious representatives from the twelve synagogues would welcome him thus and present to him the Sifrei Torah as a gesture of compliance and loyalty. It was decided, the thirteenth year, that, in reverence to the Torah itself, the ruler would only be presented with empty containers. A Jewish traitor, a newly converted Christian who aspired to earn the palaces' favour, revealed this deception to the king. The next day, the king made a surprise visit to the Giudecca to verify this accusation in person and punish the community. As legend has it, the night before the king's visit, the prophet Elijah appeared, in a dream, to one of the guardians of the twelve synagogues, therefore allowing for the Torah books to be displayed before the king and the traitor's scheme deterred.¹⁶⁵

Frazzetto concludes his article by affirming that the restitution of this Purim is emblematic of the promising outcome reserved for the Jews of Syracuse. «*Forgotten for too long, they are coming back home.*»(Frazzetto, 2014).

Let us now discuss the different themes that are present in this narrative. Through the different captions highlighted by the author, it is evident that important messages are being put forward. First, that the presence of Jews in Sicily, and more precisely, in Syracuse, is ancient. Second, that this Jewish community, established a very long time ago, latent for centuries, is reviving itself. Third, that this contemporary community is regaining ownership of what they consider theirs. These central ideas are pursued throughout the entire article.

Frazzetto presents the town as a Jewish place.

« [...] *its own Giudecca (Jewish quarter) that used to have 12 synagogues and, just before the Spanish edict, counted a community of at least 5,000 Jews.* »(Frazzetto, 2014).

¹⁶⁵ Frazzetto, G. (2014).

The notion that there is strength in number seems to apply beautifully to this statement. It tells us that, before the expulsion, this was not a small, unnoticed or irrelevant community but a thriving and unique society that left traces.

« *The Giudecca reveals distinct marks of the ancient Jewish presence [...] In 1987, a remarkable treasure was discovered: an abandoned mikveh dating to the Byzantine era, [...]* »(Frazzetto, 2014).

Indeed, in between these quotes, we are presented with several instances that demonstrate the long-lasting presence of Jews in Syracuse. However, the most notable example given to us is the ancient ritual bath that was recently discovered towards the end of the 20th century. The choice of words used to describe the mikveh and its discovery is quite revealing. Terms like “*remarkable treasure*” or the repetition of “*serendipitous*” presents the discovery, not merely as a happy accident but as something of great value.¹⁶⁶ Its description as being in “*perfect condition*” despite « [...] *Sicily’s strongest earthquake on record in 1693.* »(Frazzetto, 2014) exposes this finding as a miracle. Just like the Jewish traditions and customs that were maintained and passed down to unknowing Jewish descendants, the mikveh never truly disappeared. They all survived. The way in which the discovery is presented, relatively at the beginning of the article, also suggests that this incredible discovery is what inspired what was to come.

The issue of this Jewish community coming back to life is mostly illustrated through Di Mauro’s presence, ambition and contribution. In the article, he shared that « [...] *a growing number of people are asking me to help them rediscover their Jewish roots.*” »(Frazzetto, 2014). Once again, there is strength in numbers. Without individual participation or interest, there can be no communal structure, no matter the related efforts and dedication to potential goals.

The mention of the new synagogue also contextualizes the emphasis of the Jewish renaissance.

« *The small, but compact current community now reunites in a synagogue on via Italia.* »(Frazzetto, 2014).

¹⁶⁶ Frazzetto, G. (2014).

Having a place of worship, a place to call their own symbolizes putting down roots. However, this revival theme also seems to incorporate the notion of a ‘long-awaited’ come back. It is not merely due to the fact that some members have migrated back to the island or that secret traditions and buried ritual spaces were never quite gone and are now returned. It includes the notion of a long wait. When Di Mauro shares that « *“This is a momentous period, [...] “After more than 500 years, [...] I am helping them to come back home,” [...] »*(Frazzetto, 2014) it implies that people have been waiting for this to happen, anticipated it, wished for it, perhaps so has he, for a long time.

This implication is also linked to another of Frazzetto’s main ideas; regaining ownership. In his article, this caption is mainly related to ‘Purim Katan’ and the novelty of a memorable event within the new community; the first reading, in over five centuries, of the relevant scroll of their second Purim. Once again, we are subjected to the idea of a long-awaited moment. In this section, we are also greeted by what seems to be a theme of ‘setting things right’.

« The ritual had long been time misattributed to the city of Saragosa in Spain, but historians recently recognized that it actually originated in Syracuse. »(Frazzetto, 2014).

In this statement, the ‘historians’, even though they are not mentioned by name, embody a form of authority that gives validity to the story. Now, the truth has resurfaced, and the record has been set straight. Not only when it comes to Purim but overall. We are even told that « *Rabbi Di Mauro has celebrated conversions - some in the underground mikveh - as well as a few marriages. »*(Frazzetto, 2014).

They have reclaimed their past, their cultural heritage, in both its tangible and intangible aspects. The statement sharing the news that the ancient ritual baths have been utilized in modern times is especially symbolic of the idea of restitution.

This particular media sample has shown us an image of Jewish presence in Syracuse as being ancient. It has also exposed the idea that they are therefore justified in coming back and they are doing so. They have been waiting a long time for the opportunity, and it seems to be through the discovery of this ancient mikveh that a Jewish renaissance emerged in

Syracuse. Through the people and by using various remnants of the past as tools, the new Jewish community of Syracuse is taking back what they consider to be theirs.

2.4.3. Sample 3

The third and final media sample we will analyze is a little different from the other two. First, it was not published in a newspaper mainly catering to a Jewish audience. It was published by “Times of Sicily”, a blog dedicated to reporting on all things concerning Sicily, from food and art to heritage, politics, history and culture. The website aspires to provide quality news to English speakers. In the ‘About Us’ section of their official webpage, they advertise as being devoted to publishing for a global audience. They also invite people to consider writing for them if they so wish and if they have the interest and skills.¹⁶⁷

Our third sample “*Days of Awe in Siracusa*” was published on September 17th 2015 on the blog ‘Times of Sicily’. The author, Gary Drake, according to the short biography attached to the article, is an American freelance writer residing in Sicily. The article begins with a picture of the author and Rabbi Di Mauro within the new synagogue in Siracusa. The picture is followed by a quote from the Book of Psalms, Psalm 89:36-38. Drake then begins the main text by admitting he is not a historian. Yet, he says he knows Jews have been in Sicily for a long time. He states that the destruction of the First Temple of Jerusalem was when the Jews first started scattering. He mentions that, at the time, most were taken to Babylon, but he believes some chose to go live with the Greeks in Sicily instead of being assimilated.¹⁶⁸

In the first sentence of the next paragraph, he admits he cannot corroborate his previous affirmations. Most historians place the appearance of Jewish people in Sicily to the fall of the Second Temple of Jerusalem, he tells us. These Jews were Roman slaves.¹⁶⁹ He continues by saying that what lay in wait for the Jews of Sicily is quite similar to the same shameful treatment all European Jews suffered throughout history. The pinnacle of this

¹⁶⁷ Found via <https://www.timesofsicily.com/about-us/>

¹⁶⁸ Drake, G. (2015)

¹⁶⁹ Drake, G. (2015)

invariably unreasonable treatment was the Spanish rulers' decree of expulsion that exiled all Jews from Sicily in 1492. Our author then mentions that it is recorded in history that the Sicily officially welcomed the Jews back into the territory in 1740. Apparently, it was not a successful proposal, and very few returned. To top it all off, those who did take the offer and stayed where, at the very least, uprooted, once again, during the time of Mussolini and the Nazis.¹⁷⁰

Two small pictures illustrating the three central pools of the Casa Bianca mikveh, under different angles, are inserted at this point in the article. Drake then continues to share that, today, we can witness Jewish life, on the island, being rekindled. One of these new signs of life is expressed by the uncovering, within the old Jewish district of Siracusa, under the Hotel di Giudecca, of an ancient mikveh, a Jewish ritual bath. He reveals that this is the oldest surviving mikveh in all of Europe. It would appear to originate from the Byzantine period, a time when Jews consisted of a quarter of the overall city population. Today, he says, this monument can be found on tourist brochures.¹⁷¹ Drake declares this discovery to be the event that *«set things in motion»*(Drake, 2015). He then goes on to explain that it incited the return of Rabbi Stefano Di Mauro. Di Mauro, born in Sicily, returned to Siracusa in 2008 to establish a new synagogue, after years of living in Miami, Florida. This modest synagogue was the first to be established on the island in 500 years.¹⁷²

The author informs us that he decided to visit this synagogue during Rosh Hashanah and the 'Days of Awe'.¹⁷³ He follows this passage with a direct quote from Di Mauro, who explains that he has been asked to help people reclaim their family history. Drake informs us that these individuals are probably the scions of the Jews that remained in Sicily, those who were made to convert to Catholicism, either during the time of the Spanish Inquisition or the Crusades. Seemingly, these families passed down Jewish traditions, customs of which the origins were no longer known to be Jewish. An article published by the Jewish newspaper

¹⁷⁰ Drake, G. (2015)

¹⁷¹ Drake, G. (2015)

¹⁷² Drake, G. (2015)

¹⁷³ Rosh Hashanah is the Jewish New Year, part of the High Holy days, which are a complicated and varying notion/timeline. In this context, our author seems to designate "Days of Awe" to the celebration of Rosh Hashanah as well as the ten days conducive to repentance that separates it from the celebration of Yom Kippur, the day of atonement.

Haaretz in 2010 supports this particular information¹⁷⁴, which Drake then quotes for a few lines.¹⁷⁵

The first photograph placed at the beginning of the article, the one with Di Mauro and Drake, is once again inserted here next to the text. Drake continues by explaining that Di Mauro is an Orthodox rabbi. He also mentions that the new synagogue the rabbi founded adheres to Sephardic practice. Yet, its attendees belong to a multitude of Jewish traditions which are not specified. Di Mauro wishes for everyone to feel welcome, even non-Jews, and has campaigned relentlessly to build up such an atmosphere.¹⁷⁶

Our author then shares his perceptions, experiences and opinions about his visit during Rosh Hashanah. He expresses fascination towards the notion that the attendees truly desired to attend. Some lived far away and, nevertheless, travelled at their own expense and spent their time off in the make-do synagogue. He admits he has never observed anything as genuine, even compared to the New York Central Synagogue services.¹⁷⁷

Next, Drake paints a somewhat rustic image of the new synagogue of Siracusa. Giving physical descriptions and urban reference points, he shares that the space is basic, lost in plain sight, on the main floor of an apartment building near a dance studio and car repair workshop. Only a sign at the gate indicates its presence. A picture of said sign is included next to this paragraph.¹⁷⁸ The synagogue might not be much to look at but, according to our author, it possesses all the necessities: Torah scrolls in an Ark of the Covenant, a Hanukah candelabra, a ram's horn, prayer books, Talmudic texts, Jewish history books, etc. They even have a place to celebrate important life events. In Judaism, conversions are not prohibited, but they are not

¹⁷⁴ The passage is quoted from the *Haaretz* publication from 2010 is identical to a passage present in another article from *Haaretz*, the one published in 2014 (sample 2 of this analysis section). It is possible that it is the same article, published twice. However, it is impossible to know for sure as Gary Drake does not mention the author or title of the article he is quoting.

¹⁷⁵ Drake, G. (2015)

¹⁷⁶ Drake, G. (2015)

¹⁷⁷ Drake, G. (2015)

¹⁷⁸ Drake, G. (2015)

encouraged either, Jews do not evangelize. Di Mauro shared with our author that he performed a few weddings and forty conversions^{179, 180}

Pursuing on the topic of the synagogue, Drake shares what Di Mauro told him, that this small space is not an occasional place of worship. Every week, since the 2008 opening, Di Mauro has conducted Shabbat services regardless of minyan.¹⁸¹ It would be difficult for this particular synagogue to always have a minimum required present, Siracusa does not have the fifty to sixty families required to ensure a regular minyan. Di Mauro asserts that there are more Jewish descendants in Sicily than people think, they simply do not know it yet. Here, Drake shares the websites where Di Mauro posted a list of Jewish names for people to look into.¹⁸² Nearing the end of his article, our author starts to sum up the several points he discussed. Such as the fact that Jews are making a “comeback” in Sicily, and that, despite the never-ending persecutions they have suffered throughout the centuries, they are still there. He then wraps up his text with a quote about the symbolic meaning of the moon, its resilience and regeneration capabilities, qualities often similarly expressed by the Jewish People.¹⁸³

Several themes can be observed within this article, above and beyond the literal understanding of the words we read. The first idea we can notice is the idea of an old presence. Several sentences, found in different sections of the text, convey the notion that the Jews have been in Sicily, in Siracusa for a very long period of time.

« [...] when they came as captive slaves of the Roman Empire. »(Drake, 2015).

«Most likely these are descendants from families that were Jews forced to convert to Catholicism during the Crusades and Spanish Inquisition years.»(Drake, 2015).

« [...] if Sicilians with certain names looked back at their family trees, they'd discover their Jewish past. »(Drake, 2015).

¹⁷⁹ It is not clear, within the article, whether Rabbi Di Mauro's mentioned conversions are recent and focused around the Jewish community of Sicily or if that number is the integral amount of conversions he has conducted throughout his career. Based on various other articles (including sample 2 of this analysis section) that mention Rabbi Di Mauro's work, it would appear that the first option is the intended meaning.

¹⁸⁰ Drake, G. (2015)

¹⁸¹ Minyan indicates a quorum of ten Jewish men (over 13 years old) required by Jewish Law to officially pray.

¹⁸² Drake, G. (2015)

¹⁸³ Drake, G. (2015)

All these sentences urge the same notion that Jews have a past in the area. Their arrival, their existence, their presence is not a novelty. Even without specific dates, he mentions the Crusades, the Roman Empire and the Inquisition; these are not insignificant or unknown concepts; they are famous. The author chose them, most likely, because they show amplitude and readers will instinctually understand the depth of the timeline the article tackles.

The issue of time is closely related to another notion highlighted in this article; persecution.

« [...] follows the same deplorable and always-irrational history of the treatment of Jews everywhere in Europe, [...] »(Drake, 2015).

In this passage, the author pens a critical observation of historical events. He maintains the widely accepted opinion that Jews, as an ethnico-religious group and people, have repeatedly and continuously been mistreated, ostracized, everywhere they went. In this case, Sicily was no different as they were expelled in 1492.

Another idea advertised within the text is the notion of new beginnings.

« [...] returned from decades in Miami to start a small synagogue in 2008, the first on the island in 500 years. »(Drake, 2015).

The notion of new beginnings is more than merely theoretical. Fresh starts imply embracing new prospects as well as letting go of past disappointments and defeats. This small synagogue is a symbol of wonderful possibilities to come. In the same trend, fresh starts also usually entail a new mindset. An additional idea highlighted in this article is the concepts of acceptance or willingness.

«All are welcome, even non-Jews.»(Drake, 2015).

«Those who came **really** wanted to be there.»(Drake, 2015).

These passages are revealing of the ideas we just mentioned. The significance behind the words is clear. As is mentioned in the text and as most people know, Judaism is not a religion, on a broad term, that seeks converts. For a rabbi to open a synagogue with the intent of welcoming almost anyone inside it is quite extraordinary. This is not a widespread philosophy among Jews, and it demonstrates rare open-mindedness. Also quite interesting is the personal

observation of the author about those who attended the Rosh Hashanah celebrations when he visited. In his opinion, although few came and although the space is small and not much to look at, the people who participated were very willing to attend the services. I suspect it was imperative for Drake to convey this perception to us, his use of bold lettering in that particular sentence would suggest so. These notions of acceptance and willingness would appear to be directly linked to our other idea of a fresh start. Not only is the Jewish community of Siracusa reviving itself materially and philosophically but it is recruiting, and it is wanted, needed by people.

When the author describes this new synagogue, the image he draws is not impressive. Quite the opposite really, he describes the space as being very basic.

«The synagogue is located in a non-descript edifice in a non-descript street in a non-descript, but quite lively section of Siracusa.»(Drake, 2015).

Despite this humble depiction, he later confirms that it contains all it may require and lists various essential components. All of these ideas are linked, as well as lead, to the dominant theme of this article which is endurance.

«And that's not so easy.»(Drake, 2015).

Endurance is a concept that goes hand in hand with trial and adversity. Here, what Gary Drake mentions as 'not being easy' is the minyan requirement. Rabbi Di Mauro conducted weekly Shabbat services regardless of required quorum because it was impossible to fulfil, adjustments, compromise, were made in order to carry on at this time.

The notion of Jewish endurance permeates throughout the article. This is brought forth through the ideas of revival and survival. In his conclusion, Drake states clearly that *« [...] Judaism in Sicily is now showing signs of life. A comeback. »(Drake, 2015).* Despite centuries of attempts and numerous attackers *« [...] the Jew remains. »(Drake, 2015).* Indeed, we have been shown that Jewish presence of the island is ancient. We are reminded that Jews have always been persecuted. We are made aware of new beginnings, a fresh start, both physical and spiritual. We are also shown a very basic existence, yet one that is sufficient for their needs. All of these ideas urge the main idea of regeneration, persistence, resistance,

endurance. As do both quotes used to introduce and conclude Gary Drake's article. However, all of these ideas, including our central theme, are linked to a single discovery, to one event.

«*This discovery set things in motion.*»(Drake, 2015).

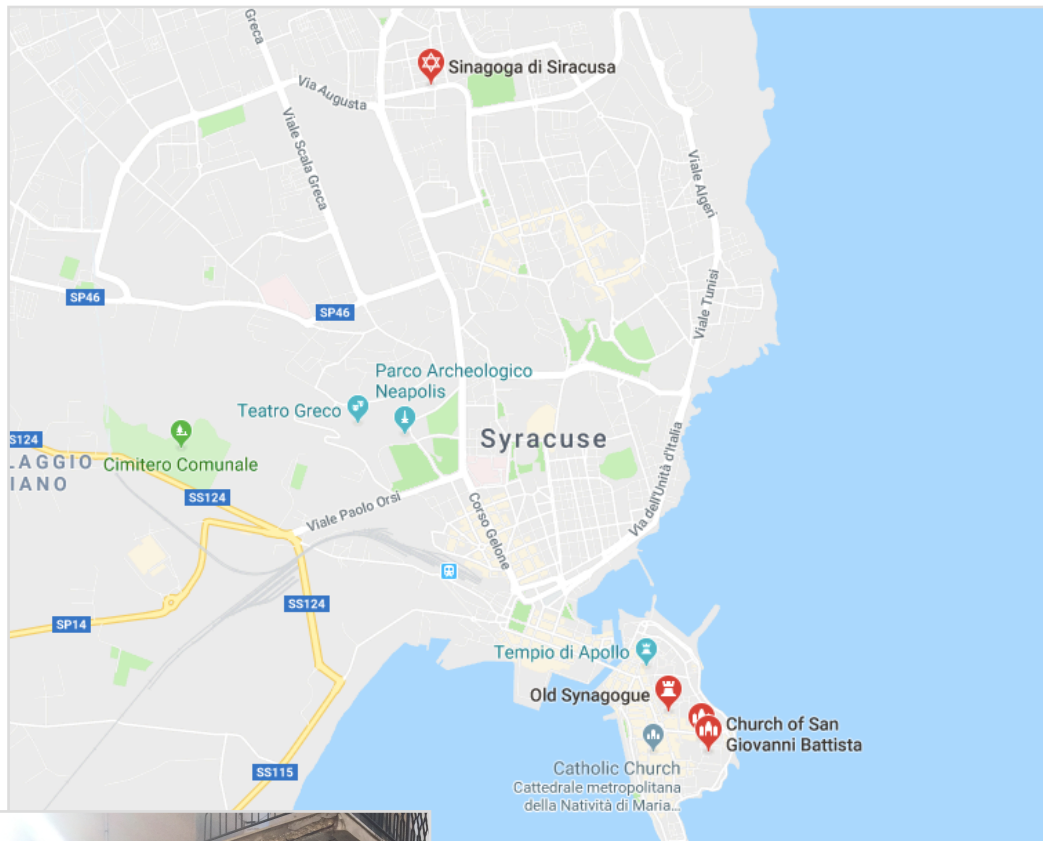
Within the article, our author declares the discovery of the Casa Bianca mikveh as the trigger for this revival. This monument, a treasure so recently uncovered, already touristic, is responsible for this Jewish comeback. Furthermore, it would appear that the ancient mikveh is as much an indicator, a proof of historical belonging as it is a possible motivator to re-appropriate one's heritage.

2.4.4. Via Italia

Fascinating to me is that these narratives that we have just analyzed are still active to this day. When I travelled to Siracusa, in the fall of 2018, to possibly interview members of this growing community, I could not find what I came for.¹⁸⁴ Prior to my arrival, my only interactions with the Jewish community of Siracusa had been via Rabbi Di Mauro.¹⁸⁵ Yet, I arrived in Siracusa prepared to approach the community without proper introduction. A few days after my arrival in Sicily, once I was satisfied that my work with the baths was progressing very well, I went out looking for the new Jewish synagogue and for people I could potentially interview. I walked well over a half hour towards the newer part of the town only to find the building abandoned and put up for rent.

¹⁸⁴ The main purpose of my visit, during my two weeks stay in Siracusa, Sicily, from November the 14th to the 28th, was to assemble data on a contemporary phenomenon; the Jewish revival movement happening all over the south of Italy. Some date this revival to the recent discovery of the ancient Mikveh on Ortigia, in 1987. I wished to investigate this monument in relation to material heritage perceptions. How is this site thought of by the community living around it, by the officials who manage it? What kind of significance does this place carry for those "Bnei Anusim", the descendants of those who were forced to convert after 1492 and who are now slowly returning to their Jewish roots? How is it used, how is it thought of, who does it touch? These are the questions that I wanted to answer through my original research.

¹⁸⁵ At the time, Di Mauro was no longer living in Sicily. Despite my efforts to obtain additional contacts in the weeks prior to my departure, technical problems with my electronic mail seemed to be the main obstacle within my communication with Rabbi Di Mauro, my link to the community. I admit that, back then, I attributed his apparent 'refusal' to provide me with other contacts in Siracusa to translation issues, old age confusion or our online communication difficulties.



[Via Italia, 88, 96100 Siracusa SR, Italy - November 18, 2018]



I rang the doorbell several times just to be certain. No trace or forwarding address visible. 88 via Italia, the address listed as the location of the new synagogue of the Jewish community of Siracusa, was the only one still on file anywhere online and on Google Maps¹⁸⁶. The fact that Google Maps¹⁸⁷ still held that location on record and that the last article I could find that witnessed this location being used as a synagogue was dated from January 2018, told me that the

¹⁸⁶ Retrieved from: <https://www.google.ca/maps/place/Sinagoga+di+Siracusa/@37.0772155,15.2694891,14z/data=!4m8!1m2!2m1!1ssinagoga+of+siracusa!3m4!1s0x1313ceeddfb25697:0x43db7c647e896e3b!8m2!3d37.0927832!4d15.2795889>

¹⁸⁷ Google Maps is an online mapping service created by Google that launched in 2004 in the United States and Canada. It launched in Italy in 2006. It is a service available on PC, tablet and smartphone that allows, from a global scale, to zoom to the scale of a home and is widely used today to locate and guide towards a selected destination.

move, or general vacating of the premises, was recent, but not the reason behind it.

I began a more thorough online research. Websites such as the “Sephardic Center of Sicily”¹⁸⁸ provided useful names to track down. Unfortunately, they did not provide me with contact information. On the website “Sicilia Ebraica” I unravelled rather alarming details while looking up the dates of last updates. While the website had an organization email address as well as the, now abandoned, synagogue’s address, DiMauro name, mission and various phone numbers¹⁸⁹, the last update for anything regarding the Siracusa community was February 12th 2013.¹⁹⁰ Yet, the website is still active today and still advertises registration for Rabbinical School and Hebrew classes.¹⁹¹ It also offers links and historical information as well a full list of Hebrew surnames.

This movement, on site, seems to have died down, and Jewish presence in Syracuse today certainly appears to be inexistent. Yet, the narratives we just explored are still in play, as we have seen, via instances such as google maps and the different official websites we encountered.

2.4.5. Windup

As we have seen, news about this mikveh and the Jewish community surrounding it, whether it be the one from the past or the present, has been in circulation for many years now. The three samples presented and analyzed in the sections above are different examples of mediated representation of Jewish heritage in Siracusa. The purpose of this analysis was to explore the function of these baths in these different media outlets. I have also included my own observations, chronicled during my field research in Siracusa this past year. What we have discovered is that the mikveh holds a crucial position within these narratives. All three articles presented the mikveh as a Jewish space, a statement to Jewish history and heritage in the area. Sample 1 and 2 mentioned its recent usage in ritual conversion, transforming the

¹⁸⁸ centrosefardicosiciliano. (2012, November 5).

¹⁸⁹ Brancato, C. (last update; 2012, April).

¹⁹⁰ Brancato, C. (last update; 2013, February 12).

¹⁹¹ Brancato, C. (last update; 2011, August)

mikveh into sacred religious space. Sample 2 and 3 endorsed the incredible discovery of these baths as the initial cause of the Jewish revival that followed. Sample 3 appears to be the only one to have pushed forth its touristic involvement, a museum of sorts, caught in between ancient monument and attraction. These are the various purposes that these references to the mikveh have within these media representations. The monument anchors the community, its belonging in the area and its initial revival. In the Findings section of this thesis, we will delve deep into the meaning these various portrayals place on this ancient monument today.

3. Findings

Historical consciousness can manifest itself in more ways than modulated oral or written histories, and these various forms may not agree with one another. Discourses and narratives have the power to potentially negate or strengthen each other.¹⁹² Now that we have explored the manner in which Jewish presence and heritage is depicted within these different narratives, the significance the Casa Bianca mikveh bears is undeniably transparent. The discovery of these Jewish baths redefined the identity of the historical district surrounding it and inspired both a physical and spiritual revival of Jewish presence in the area. The recovery of this patrimony also stimulated the return of Jewish inhabitants. Our theoretical perception of heritage, focusing on people's relationship to the past, both in its production and experience, was applied to posit how this monument is understood today. History is, after all, an account told by a human narrator with an interest in the plot (Ruggles, 2010).

A cosmological incubator

As we saw earlier, in Judaism, the ritual immersion process is symbolic of rebirth, renewal, a change in status. It would seem that the way the different Jewish mediated articles interpret the Casa Bianca Mikveh is very similar to this notion of emblematic transformation. Within the media narratives, we are introduced to a Jewish community rising out of oblivion through the discovery of this ancient mikveh. Before the famed discovery, this community was non-existent or hidden, the result of centuries of Catholic domination. After its discovery, the Jewish community's status had changed, it was reborn. Therefore, in a similar symbolic fashion to ritual immersion, the discovery of these baths capture the essence of renewal for the Jewish community who emerged as something new, something it had not been in a very long time. Forgotten, oppressed, perhaps even impure, the new Jewish community was metaphorically immersed and purified by the discovery of the Casa Bianca mikveh. Via its association to the baths, the community is reborn through an aspect of their past-and-present heritage. By associating this revival to this monument, the Jews of Sicily are reclaiming their identity, their past and their cultural memory.

¹⁹² Macdonald, S. (2013).

Throughout the analyzed material, the theme of ‘new life’ was frequently encountered. Of course, Jewish identity, Jewish life, was not only reborn through a social movement. People were not the only facets of Jewish presence to be renewed on the island. Not only through written narratives but also through aesthetics choices, the Jewish quarter of Syracuse was restored. According to the diary, the efforts to return the Jewish quarter to its original character were mostly undertaken by Amalia Daniele, the owner of the newly discovered baths. The narrative she contributes exposes her as the saviour of this district. Through her discovery of the baths, a desire to give new life to her neighbourhood was born. It is as if she, thanks to the mikveh, gave birth to, or reanimated the quarter.

Conceiving the Casa Bianca Mikveh as a cosmological incubator seems only natural and quite appropriate. Only immersion in the pure water of a mikveh allows an individual, especially a woman, to be reborn and renewed, and therefore participate in the mystery of creation of life. Therefore, the miraculous discovery of an ancient forgotten monument linked to such rituals would in itself incarnate the birth place of Jewish revival in Syracuse, both physically and spiritually. The narratives we explored expose the Casa Bianca mikveh as a trigger for memories of the past formative of emotional thought.

However, more than a mere trigger for memories, I would put forward the idea that the discovery of this monument is the vital trigger responsible for the subsequent revival of Jewish presence in the region. Without the discovery of this monument, Amalia Daniele would not have had any reason to explore a world of symbols unknown to her, revealing other Jewish structures around the Giudecca. In turn, the interest and curiosity of the academic world would be less. Possibly, the cultural prestige of medieval Syracuse would somewhat diminish, making it less attractive as a contemporary touristic destination. Perhaps, Rabbi Di Mauro would not have returned to establish the first synagogue in Sicily since the edict of expulsion of 1492, instigating a Jewish revival. Consequently, generations of Jewish descendants would still keep to secret identities. Truly, it is impossible to fathom the extent of ‘what if’s’. The important aspect of this idea is that the discovery of this hypogeum unleashed magic upon Siracusa.

Coming back to my original incubation metaphor, the Casa Bianca mikveh itself was submerged underground for 500 years. It was submersed as a crucial component of Jewish

daily life and identity but emerged as something changed, as something new, with a new status; an emblem of Jewish past, present and future in Ortygia.

Matters of representation

We must recognize and acknowledge that notions of heritage ownership awards the right to control the access to this monument. It also implies the control of the income that visits to the monument generate. Most importantly, it warrants the power to oversee the production of knowledge about the past. The way in which the Jewish past is displayed, both in narrative format and via its experience, enables relational performances through which the collective imagination invests in the past.

Let us not forget that Amalia Daniele not only wrote the diary, which we consider one of the main historical narratives constructing the Jewish past of Syracuse, but she also published it and is the only one who guarantees its distribution by making it available to the public in her hotel gift shop. As such, she controls what is told about this place, what circulates, what knowledge is shared or promoted. However, the diary is only one of the elements she oversees. As sole owner of the mikveh and the hotel that stands above it, she has complete control over its every aspect; logistically, financially, etc. She provides the possibility for visits and the tour guides of the mikveh are in her employ. Let us also remember that Amalia Daniele forbids private pictures being taken in the underground mikveh. The official website of the hotel is also used to advertise the uniqueness of the building. Hence, not only does she control the access to the monument, she also controls the digital circulation of its visual representation.

The current representations of the Jewish past of Syracuse correspond to her vision. The diary, the hotel website, the name of her hotel, her endeavours in restoring the Jewish quarter's visible features, guided tours of the mikveh, even her added name (Di Bagni) should all be considered efforts to advertise the particularities of the Jewish quarter and its past—and her intertwinement with it.

At the core of this frame we find the Casa Bianca mikveh. Its uncovering resulted in tourism influx and also generated a great amount of scholarly interest in the area. In turn, this contributed to renewed efforts of conservation, of selected layers of history being displayed in order to keep the historical narrative of the Jewish past thriving. Today, in the heart of

Ortygia, visitors and locals alike will find memories and associations to a forgotten past. A testimony of material culture selected and patiently restored to efficiently create and corroborate the image of a rising phoenix.¹⁹³ The ancient Jewish baths wondrously bring us back in time. They embody a mirror to the past. Unchanged and perfectly preserved, they help remind people of the purity of what was lost.

In the analysis, we saw that Amalia Daniele's vision for the future of the quarter was wrapped in promoting aspects of Jewish history. However, this brings about parallel nuances. For one, she actively engages in the concept of heritage tourism. Visitors of the Giudecca are provided with evocative visual and anecdotal information that allows them to relive images of everyday medieval Jewish life through flashbacks. Yet, the product of these efforts to reconstitute Jewish presence in the area appear to have facilitated the new Jewish community's aspirations to start reclaiming their lost heritage. Consequently, both tangible and intangible aspects of Jewish heritage were revived in the city, and possibly in the rest of Sicily and the south of Italy as well.

Although the Jewish identity of the mikveh and the Giudecca of Syracuse are put forward through the diary narrative and 'on site' reconstructions, today, these places are visited by all types of people regardless of ethnicity, gender or religion. Even when it came to giving a voice, a soul, back to the ancient synagogue *Siracusa III Millennio* (Amalia Daniele's cultural association) was managing at the time, the concerts and events organised within its walls were not Jewish by nature. After all, one of the ideas put forth by Amalia Daniele in her diary was that Jewish history belongs to everyone. As previously stated, Daniele has complete jurisdiction over the mikveh as well as the message it carries. In granting access to everyone, by reopening a chapter of history she, herself, declares that it belongs to all, she is erasing the intentional cultural eradication that took place centuries ago. Perhaps, in the end, this is not only a representation of a lost Jewish past but also of its opposer. Regardless, the Casa Bianca mikveh's role as one of the oldest and most evocative ritual baths in the world cannot be denied. Its crucial significance lies within its suggestive capabilities as place of memory. By visiting or reading about the mikveh, one can imagine a past otherwise destined to the abyss.

¹⁹³ Mulè, N. & Scandaliato, A. (2015).

4. Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I have attempted to show that the Jewish baths of Syracuse should be considered the nexus of Jewish heritage in the area. Inspired by critical heritage studies, this thesis reviewed several narratives constructed around and generated through the newly discovered Casa Bianca mikveh. The goal was to add additional layers to our understanding of this heritage site, its framework and related effects.

A qualitative literary analysis was conducted on the diary published by the owner of the hotel under which reside the ancient baths as well as on a contemporary selection of three mediated Jewish representations of the Sicilian Jews. In a mixed methods approach, the discussion combined this literary analysis to data I, myself, had collected in my ethnographical studies conducted within the year in Ortygia. In all respects, this thesis explored how Jewish presence is staged and how Jewish heritage is enacted via these various portrayals. Without passing judgement on or questioning the validity/authenticity of the various historical constructs that have developed around the Jewish baths of Syracuse, I have shown how these different constructs preserve, glorify, sell, as well as exist amongst the physical remnants of the past.

The outcome of this thorough exploration of the Casa Bianca Mikveh in relation to how meaning is generated and shaped through its narratives and experiences invites to several readings. Mainly, that on several levels, the Casa Bianca Mikveh personifies a cosmological incubator engaged in multiple aspects of change related to Jewish presence in Syracuse. In this case, the change of status attributed to an individual who underwent ritual immersion is elevated to an entire town. I posit that the discovery of the Casa Bianca mikveh re-birthed the historical presence of the Jews in Syracuse. Additionally, it is a trigger for memories of the past, essential to the concept of remembrance and its socio-cultural effects on people. The stories shared in relation to this place construct new stories and new ways of viewing Jewish life, history and presence in Ortygia.

In conclusion, I have found that the retrieval of this material heritage does not only shape the present and the past through the present. It will also shape the future, making it possible for other lesser known or forgotten stories to become more visible to generations to come.

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