

DR. MARISA DE SPAGNOLIS CONTICELLO'S INTRODUCTION

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am very happy to be here tonight, and to have the chance to talk to you about my new discoveries in Southern Campania, in the area of Nocera.

I want to thank very much the International Catacomb Society, Boston, and the Hebrew College, Boston, who gave me the opportunity to come here and to meet you.

My special thanks to Mrs. Estelle Brettman, Executive Director of the International Catacomb Society, Boston (61 Beacon Street) who suggested that I present the Inaugural Lecture of the International Commemorative Founders' Lecture Series in memory of Dr. Mark D. Altschule, Lt. General James M. Gavin, Mrs. Louise LaGorce Hickey, and Robert M. Morrison.

This lecture is going to be published very soon in an article in Italy.

INAUGURAL LECTURE OF THE INTERNATIONAL CATACOMB SOCIETY'S COMMEMORATIVE
FOUNDER'S LECTURE SERIES

In memory of Society Founders: Dr. Mark D. Altschule, Lt. Gen. James M. Gavin,
Louise LaGorce Hickey, and Robert M. Morrison

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New Light on the Role of Women in the Ancient Synagogues of the Roman Empire
by Dr. Marisa de Spagnolis Conticello

In September 1988 at Nocera Superiore, during the construction of a new section
of railway line called Monte al Vesuvio, there came to light numerous
archaeological finds from different periods. The railway descends from the
northern side, touching the northwestern wall of the ancient city of Nuceria
Alfaterna, and then runs eastwards, continuing and doubling the old section of
the railway.

Before proceeding to examine in detail the Jewish inscriptions to be described
this evening, it would seem appropriate to give some preliminary background.

The ancient city of Nocera, dating back to the 6th century B.C. and situated
strategically in a very important position between Pompeii and Salerno, was
noted for its political and economic importance from ancient writings. Various
archaeological discoveries and rich necropolises also attest to the wealth of
this city.

The entire ancient city is still buried 3-7 meters underground. Visible today
are sections of the belt of walls with towers, a small part of the city with
houses and shops along one of the principal streets, the remains of a Roman
theater (as large as that in Naples), and vestiges of a baptistery (dating
back to the 5th c. A.D.).

During the work on the construction of the railway, numerous archaeological
finds came to light. I shall present at this time only a small selection.

We see now a tomb of the 5th century B.C. with a few objects, among which is a
splendid red-figured *kylix* with a representation of an athlete.

This is a tomb of the 5th century B.C. with rich funerary furnishings, among
which are 2 black-figured *lekythoi* and an *oinochoe* with black glaze.

Numerous are the finds from other more recent periods such as we see in the
1st century B.C. tomb of a 2-year old child with toys nearby.

Found in a child's tomb of the period immediately following the eruption of
Vesuvius in 79 A.D. was a recycled terracotta slab with griffins of the
Augustan period.

We shall now go on to examine another very important zone discovered during
the course of this work which was always carried on outside the eastern wall

of the ancient city. We excavated 70 superimposed *stipi* (a kind of well) with votive offerings (including thousands of miniature terracotta vases and lamps) to a syncretistic goddess who combined attributes of such Oriental deities as Isis and Cybele. These *stipi* date from the 3rd c. B.C. to the 2nd c. A.D., the latter excavated in a 50 cm. deep layer of volcanic lapilli from the 79 A.D. eruption. The presence of a sanctuary dedicated to Oriental religions demonstrates the existence of a large population of Oriental people here.

In the course of building a parapet of the new section of the Monte al Vesuvio railway in the S. Clemente locality (at the Santa Lucia trench at the mouth of the Alfaterna tunnel, second line), there came to light a series of tombs from the 1st c. A.D. (graves nos. 3, 4, 5, 7, 10), and from the Late Imperial Period, the latter were 9 in number. This entire excavation has been under the constant control of and carried out in the presence of technical personnel from the Archaeological National Superintendence of Salerno, Benevento, Avellino and under my direction and responsibility.

This Late Roman necropolis has been explored only within the limits of the new railway section and it has been ascertained that it is clearly located south-southwest, in part under modern buildings. The tombs were uncovered easily because they were situated at a shallow depth of 30 centimeters above a layer of soft stone dating back to 79 A.D., and only 2 have been dug deeper cutting through the layer of soft stone. Tombs nos. 13 and 16 presented the traditional gable-type form with twin large tiles covering the length plus two at the head; tombs nos. 15, 16, 18, and 19 were of the coffin type formed by blocks of tufa with tile coverings, and still another type (nos. 20 and 21) was the normal trench grave with the body deposited either directly in the earth or upon a layer of tiles (no. 14), again with a cover of tiles.

All the tombs presented the same orientation -- southeast-northwest with the head towards the northwest. No traces of funerary furnishings were found.

On September twenty-third, 1988, tomb No. 17 of the coffin type, formed by irregular tufa blocks, squared on the interior, and covered by three large flat tiles, was excavated. Two tiles were placed transversely with an east-west orientation, and a third longitudinally southeast-northwest. Even the supine position of the deceased was supported by tiles. The coffin-type grave formed by blocks of bluish-grey nucerine tufa presented a new element, not found in the others explored to date: three blocks of recycled marble, two of which were inserted at the base of the long southwest side and the third in the long northeast side.

Upon dismantling the tomb I was able to observe that one of the two marble blocks placed along the southwest side and facing inwards towards the burial was inscribed with Greek characters and a representation of the menorah, the Hebrew candelabrum *eptalygnos* (7-branched); the other block on this side was anepigraphic or without epigraphy. The marble block found in the northeast side also revealed an inscription in Greek characters and a second representation of a Hebrew candelabrum, in seven-branched form. All three blocks were of Italic marble, and were made as parts of architectural elements, particularly frames, each with the mounting between them completely different. The

dimensions and width of the slabs varied: 1) length 70 centimeters, height 15 centimeters; 2) length 80 centimeters, height 24 centimeters; 3) Length 1 meter and 5 centimeters, height 12 centimeters. The three marble blocks were placed in the tomb in the same manner as the blocks of tufa and clearly appear to have been recycled since they were originally part of a building which had been destroyed.

The first block bears a Greek inscription on one line with characters irregularly distributed. Of differing height varying from 4 to 7 centimeters, the letters read *PEDONEIOUS GRAMATEOUS*. In considering the fracture of the marble after the second word (marble which on the reverse side exhibits rough indentations for attachment to a walled structure), it is possible to hypothesize that the inscription continued. The marble is inscribed with the name *PEDONEIOUS* and the title *GRAMATEOUS*. A representation of a menorah divides the two words. Since the second block is not of particular interest, I shall not discuss it further here. The third marble block, discovered on the northeast side of the tomb, is also inscribed in Greek letters of varying height (between 4 to 7 centimeters) in a single irregular line incised on a triangular section of cornice. It reads *MYRINA PRESBYTERA GYNE TOU PEDONIU*. The reverse of the stone is drilled with three holes for the insertion of iron bars and, like the other inscribed marble, there are rough indentations for affixing to a walled structure on this side.

This inscription is also incomplete, and the paleography is distinguished by apexed lunar characters as for example in the letters, *epsilon*, *sigma*, and *omega*. It is to be noted that the Roman Jews could not distinguish the diphthong *oi* from the simple *u*. This inscription bears the name of *MYRINA, PRESBYTERA*, wife of *PEDONIU*, the person in the preceding epigraph. The two epigraphs refer to two personages, *PEDONEIOUS* and *MYRINA*, names never recorded in Jewish documentation. Both underline their titles which follow their names. As for *Myrina's* title, that of *presbytera*, it should be noted that it is fairly rare and reserved for women, as in three of the inscriptions at Venosa, and one in Crete, Thrace, Tripolitania, and Rome. Since there have been fewer of these titles recorded for women, this has led scholars to offer various hypotheses, hypotheses which we shall summarize here. Frey quotes Krauss who states that the title *presbytera* was probably given to women who were wives of presbyters and thus the title was but a reflection of the status of the husband. And then again, Frey records Juster's presumption that it was "a simple title," conferred by custom upon women "*plieuse et venerées dans la communauté.*" Frey himself also translates the term simply as a "*femme agée.*" Leon opines that this title, may be a transfer to the wife of the husband's title, honorifically, or an honour conferred on women who had distinguished themselves with special merit within the community, or, in some cases, it may apply to an "elderly woman." As for men, this title seems to relate to venerated social status.

Examining the office of *Pedoneious*, *gramateous* or *grammateus*, we must remember that it is extensively recorded and appears in some form, in fact, 26 times in Roman Jewish epigraphs. For *grammateus* there also exists various hypotheses in the literature, since again scholars do not agree on the exact significance of this title.

Schürer states that the *grammateus* was not a proper official of the community, but a doctor of the Law or an expert in juridical procedures. Berliner also believes that they are persons especially learned in the Law or scribes in the common sense of the term. Vogelstein and Rieger believe that this title was given to men who were experts in copying the scrolls of the Law used in the synagogues or in revising, according to prescription, contracts, marriage certificates, and divorce documents. On the other hand, Frey deduces from examining numerous epigraphs that *grammateus* does not mean scribe but rather a highly-esteemed functionary. Leon claims that the *grammateus* was the secretary of the congregation who recorded the minutes of the congregational *gerusia* and those of the members' assembly, updated lists of the community members, and conserved important documents just as he does today. Both scholars agree that because of the importance of his office, this official had the right to inscribe it upon his tombstone.

The discovery of the two epigraphs, re-utilized as burial material in a tomb belonging to a subsequent period, permits us to acquire data of notable interest.

These unexpected finds were the first evidence in the city of Nuceria of the presence of a Jewish community -- a fact up to now never documented, even though there was evidence of the presence of a Jews in the vicinity, particularly in Pompeii. But my findings permit us to determine that there must have been a Jewish community in this city large enough and important enough to be organized in its civil functions. These two epigraphs bearing two titles associated with the administration of the community, in just two lines and seven words of inscription in total, offer evidence for the presence of a Jewish community at Nuceria. The fact that this community was organized in its administrative functions, as the titles of *GRAMATEOUS* and *PRESBYTERA* would suggest, implies the existence of Jewish communal life and of a synagogue around which a community gathered. Further confirmation of this hypothesis is offered by the inscriptions themselves written in Greek, the language most commonly used by Diaspora Jews at this time. Typical of dedicatory epigraphy, they were written in a single line, only, upon architectural slabs -- in fewer lines than epitaphs. As for the use of the architectural elements employed for the inscriptions, it must be determined if these elements were utilized casually or if they were chosen deliberately as architectural elements of a building. Myrina's inscription was originally the entablature of a door. This suggests that we are dealing with marbles removed from a synagogue. In a particular type of synagogue -- that of the Galilean area-- there are many dedicatory inscriptions on supports of architectural elements, on doorways, on columns, on frames and on other slabs associated with these structures.

The building in which our inscriptions had been affixed was destroyed by the time the Late Period necropolis which we are exploring came into use, and these inscriptions were re-employed in a tomb. Also very noteworthy in these two Jewish inscriptions is the rarity that in seven words in two lines, as mentioned above, there are two titles and they are attributed to a married couple: a *PRESBYTERA*, wife of a *GRAMATEOUS*. These two inscriptions, in fact, could help resolve the much debated problem, we have discussed, namely that of the significance of the attribution of the two titles. To have derived the

term *presbytera* from the title *grammateus* is improbable. Therefore the title attributed to Myrina has to be considered her own and not reflective. Whether, then, it signifies a religious office within the community, as I personally believe, or was just an honorific title without administrative significance cannot be ascertained definitely, but a step forward seems to have been made in clarifying the confusion concerning women bearing official titles in ancient synagogues. As for Pedoneios, he clearly would have had important administrative responsibilities, as described above, within the community.

These two inscriptions in Greek together with those in storage of the Naples National Archaeological Museum are the only Roman Jewish inscriptions, discovered in Campania, written in the Greek language. It must be observed, nevertheless, that the Jewish inscriptions written in Greek found in and around Naples, are of a funerary nature, whereas our two appear almost certainly to be of a dedicatory character. Because of the similarity in the paleography of the cited inscriptions in the Naples National Archeological Museum and our two inscriptions, we can arrive at a chronology of the fourth to fifth centuries A.D.

This data seems to confirm Leon's observations that inscriptions recording Jewish *presbyteri* outside the city of Rome date to about the fourth century A.D. and later. Our two inscriptions were evidently incised by two different persons (*lapicidi*), as shown by the diversity of the execution of the letters in each inscription. It can be noticed, for example, that the apices of the letters in one of the inscriptions are missing in the other, and that there is a variation in the drawing of the menorah on each slab. In spite of the paleographic diversity between the two stones, the dates of execution must have been fairly close, of course, because they belonged to a husband and wife.

The discovery of the two inscriptions in the territory of Nocera, appears to be of major interest because it opens a new page in the history of Nuceria Alfaterna, a city which is relatively unknown. We hope that surveying and investigating its territory together with systematic excavations and explorations will lead to new and significant finds relative to the discovery of a Jewish presence in this territory. Such finds would augment even further the information from this fortunate initial discovery revealing a hitherto unknown Jewish congregation.

The existence of this Jewish community should not be a complete surprise because there is now much evidence for a Jewish presence in Campania. Jewish communities existed at Pozzuoli, Nola, Bacoli, Marano, Brusciano, Capua, Naples, and, not far from our territory, at Herculaneum, Pompeii, Stabiae, and Salerno. Recently there was discovered at Cimitile, near Nola, a terracotta lamp with a relief representing the menorah. The presence of Jewish communities in the area of southern Campania, dates from the first century A.D., to modern times, but none of this evidence attests directly or indirectly to the existence in the Roman period of organized communities with their own autonomous cult buildings.

Adding to this testimony more data of great significance, is my discovery of these two Jewish inscriptions in Greek, which were brought to light during our excavations in the necropolis, in the area of the site of S. Clemente, in Nocera. Referring as they do to the administrative organization of the community, they testify that there was a community in ancient Nuceria of the 4th century A.D. that established a synagogue for assembling.

Up to this time in Italy only two synagogues have been discovered, one in Ostia near Rome and another in Bovillae Marina in Calabria. The discovery of our inscriptions reveals the existence of a third synagogue. I feel that this synagogue was not too distant from the sanctuary dedicated to the Oriental cults, found on the east side of the town, outside of the city belt. We hope that further excavations in the area will offer us the possibility of discovering this synagogue.