Moses b. Samuel of Roquemaure left one Hebrew poem behind him, and it did not find many modern readers. The Jewish physician, who is better known by his Christian name, Juan de Aviñon, spent much of his early life in Avignon and its vicinity. Scholars believe that his conversion occurred close to 1352, when he left the papal city for Seville and a long career at the ecclesiastical court there, which was renowned for the intellectual abilities and humanist temperaments of its archbishops. While in Seville, Moses (now Juan) completed the two medical works most associated with his name, a Hebrew translation of Bernard de Gordon’s *Lilium Medicinae*, and an original medical compendium in Castillian called the *Sevillana Medicina*. The latter work especially is noteworthy for its originality and breadth, and in fact it is one of the few original works of Castilian medicine to survive the Middle Ages. Both of these medical works continue to be the subject of new research.¹

Moses’ Hebrew poem has fared less well. It was published with a brief introduction by A. Neubauer in *Revue des Études Juives* 10 (1885).² Neubauer identified the target of Meir’s wrath as the idiosyncratic exegete and philosopher, Shemarya b. Elia ha’lkriti (“of Crete”—sometimes he is also described as coming specifically from Negroponte) and declared Moses’ verse polemic “untranslatable,” a judgment he had in fact inherited from Geiger, who dismissed the poem largely on grounds of incomprehensibility. However, if we examine the poem carefully, we can see that while the copy is in some places problematic, the text is in general neither incomprehensible nor untranslatable. Indeed, it illustrates a striking inter-


est in incorporating forms of direct and reported speech into verse in ways that dramatize the poem’s polemical claims while suggesting the dizzying impact competing versions of “truth” could have on listeners. According to Moses, Shemarya is contemptible – and dangerous – because he has not only made false prophecies, but he has declared himself the messiah. Furthermore, according to Moses, Shemarya’s attempts to deceive his public eventually failed, and he was duly imprisoned and left to die.

Shemarya b. Elia is a known historical figure who has himself been the subject of several recent studies. Curiously, we know that death in prison was not at all his fate. The Jewish writer, who with a number of other Balkan Jews was drawn to the court of King Robert of Naples (the “second Solomon”), spent many years in Italy, certainly in Rome and apparently also in Naples, before traveling more widely in Italy and Spain and ultimately dying (of old age!) in Candia (Greece). So Moses’ depiction of Shemarya’s fate is quite untrue, which is interesting in itself as an indication of the disinterest of polemical verse in what today we would call historical or even journalistic “truth.” Moses indicates both in the preface and body of his poem that he encountered Shemarya in a city he calls “Tolentol,” which most scholars have casually identified as a garbled form of “Toledo” but which I believe Colette Sirat has correctly read as referring to Tolentino in Naples. Thus, minimally, Moses tells us in this poem that he spent some time in Italy, and significantly, this period, and his encounter with Shemarya, occurred very close to his conversion (Shemarya’s prophecies are made in 1352 and will be ultimately proven false in 1358). Elsewhere I discuss the possibility that Moses may have even been in the company of the powerful papal legate from Seville, Cardinal Gil Albornoz, on his mission to extirpate heresy in Italy.

---


5 Sirat (1980).

6 A chapter on Moses and this poem will appear in a book in progress, tentatively titled “Detours and Delays.” The core argument was presented in a talk at the Medieval Academy’s annual meeting in New Haven in March 2010 under the revised title “Moses b. Samuel de Roquemaure (Juan de Aviñón): A Physician Attacks His Enemy in Verse.”