The Italian Society for the Study of Judaism (AISG) held its 19th International Congress in the residence “Alla Giudecca” on the island of Ortigia in Siracusa (Sicily) in late September 2005. The conference was arranged thanks to the efforts of the President of the region of Sicily, the district and the municipality of Siracusa, the Archimedes University consortium of Siracusa, the Department of Histories and Methodologies for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage, Bologna University (Ravenna), the Department of Euro-Mediterranean Civilizations, Palermo University and the Officina of Medieval Studies of Palermo.

The first session of the congress was chaired by P. C. Ioly Zorattini and was opened by C. Colafemmina (“A Doctor from Oria at the Court of the Fatimids”), who reconstructed the biography of a Jewish doctor from Oria who was captured in 925 C.E. by the Fatimids during their conquest of Puglia and Calabria. After being redeemed, he became the official doctor of some caliphs of that dynasty. Colafemmina’s paper concentrated on the analysis of Hebrew and Arabic sources that differ in the identification of the doctor’s name, but seem to agree on his biographical data. M. Perani (“The School of Hebrew Copyists of Otranto—11th Century—New Findings”) showed how the Jewish community of Otranto, established soon after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., saw a revival in the use of the Hebrew language, and substituted it for Greek, which they had previously used even for liturgy around the eighth century. Hebrew handwriting underwent a sudden evolution in the tenth and eleventh centuries, thanks to switching to the use of paper as a writing material and the shift of Jewish cultural consciousness from the East to the Iberian peninsula. In Otranto especially, a protosquare orthographic style of direct Eastern origin came into use, anticipating the differentiation of European Hebrew Handwriting in Italian, Ashkenazi and...
Sephardic, while cursive handwriting was developing in Oriental communities. Perani studied two complete Hebrew manuscripts preserved in the Biblioteca Vaticana and in the Biblioteca Palatina in Parma and two fragments from the “Italian Genizah”, discovered in the Bologna State Archive, and found the presence of some common writing traits which could suggest the existence of a school of Hebrew copyists in Siracusa, the nature and importance of which are difficult to define, given the lack of direct evidence. S. Simonsohn (“From Sicily to Jerusalem: ‘Aliyyah of Sicilian Jews in the 14th century”) underlined the consistent increase in the number of Italian Jews in the population of Jerusalem during the second half of the fifteenth century, due in part to renewed Messianic anticipation. Italian ruling powers (mainly Venice and Naples) responded to these movements by imposing prohibitions and heavy fines. Basing his study on documents found in Sicilian archives, Simonsohn outlined what happened to a group of Jews who were sailing on the De Burgos brothers’ ship towards Jerusalem: the illegal carriage was discovered and stopped, and sanctions were imposed on shipping as well as on the emigrants. Nevertheless, those sanctions were lifted: eventually several groups of Jews were allowed to make ‘aliyyah in exchange for a certain amount of money. By means of a careful study of archival records, A. Scandaliato (“Two Distinguished Jewish Doctors of Sicily in the 15th Century”) described the economic, social and domestic conditions of some Jewish doctors working in fifteenth-century Sicily. The paper focused mainly on the De Malta family and the personality of Lazzaro Sacerdote, who among other things practised medicine and entrepreneurial activities in Termini Imerese and also lent sums of money to farmers, financially supported the rebuilding of Termini’s walls and was rewarded with some land for construction. In addition, he had a tabernacle built and dedicated to him in the local synagogue and he obtained the qualification of doctor artium et medicinae, which entitled him to teach medicine. D. Burgaretta read a paper about “The Purim of Siracusa in the Light of its Handwritten Copies.” When Jewish communities escaped calamities, they often composed tales of salvation similar to the one told in the Scroll of Esther. The so-called “Purim of Siracusa” was observed originally in Italy, but gained wide fame after the expulsion of 1492. As the names of the Italian city of Siracusa and the Spanish Saragozza were often confused in the Middle Ages, one of the main points of