
David B. Ruderman

*University of Pennsylvania, ruderman@sas.upenn.edu*

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**Abstract**

After Joseph Colon, Azriel Diena and Moses Provenzali were the leading rabbinic authorities in Renaissance Italy to have left behind complete collections of their responsa. Yet, until now, only the responsa of Colon have ever been published in their entirety while the extensive collections of the other two, along with those of a large number of other Italian rabbis, still remain for the most part in manuscript.1 In recent years, however, the Chaim Rosenberg School of Jewish Studies at Tel Aviv University, under the leadership of Professors Shlomo Simonsohn and Daniel Carpi, have published a considerable number of texts and studies on the history of Italian Jewry. Yacov Boksenboim's edition of the responsa of Rabbi Azriel Diena (a project of two volumes of which the first has already appeared) represents one of the products of this ongoing series of publications.

**Disciplines**

Cultural History | History | History of Religion | Jewish Studies

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After Joseph Colon, Azriel Diena and Moses Provenzali were the leading rabbinic authorities of Renaissance Italy to have left behind complete collections of their responsa. Yet, until now, only the responsa of Colon have ever been published in their entirety while the extensive collections of the other two, along with those of a large number of other Italian rabbis, still remain for the most part in manuscript. In recent years, however, the Chaim Rosenberg School of Jewish Studies at Tel Aviv University, under the leadership of Professors Shlomo Simonsohn and Daniel Carpi, have published a considerable number of texts and studies on the history of Italian Jewry. Yaakov Boksenboim’s edition of the responsa of Rabbi Azriel Diena (a project of two volumes of which the first has already appeared) represents one of the products of this ongoing series of publications.

After migrating from France, Azriel Diena lived in a number of communities of North Central Italy at the beginning of the sixteenth century, finally settling in Sabbioneta, where he died in 1536. During his active rabbinical career, he wrote some 300 responsa which are preserved in several manuscripts and which provide an exceedingly rich source for the study of Italian Jewish culture and society during Diena’s lifetime. Some time ago the late Simha Assaf recognized the importance of this collection and published selections from what he considered to be some of the more interesting of Diena’s responsa. Now Yaakov Boksenboim has assumed the imposing task of editing the complete collection of Diena, of which only the first volume, published in 1977, is considered here. To his credit, the editor has done a splendid job of determining the most accurate text of the responsa based on a study of all extant manuscripts; has carefully identified Diena’s halachic sources as well as the historical allusions found in the texts; has provided some very useful indices of individual and place names, abbreviations, and rabbinic sources; and, finally, has added a competent and informative introduction on Diena and his work.

The edition of Diena’s responsa, now made accessible to a larger group of researchers, is significant as a source of history for a variety of reasons. It provides extensive data on the role of a major rabbi living in the Italian Jewish community in the relatively early period of the beginning of the sixteenth century — the extent of his authority and his social standing in his community, as well as his relationship with other rabbis and other communities. Furthermore, it offers the researcher of Italian Jewry a kind of the degree of receptivity to Renaissance culture on the part of an Italian rabbi identified with the French Jewish sub-culture of North Central Italy. Diena’s responsa provide some gauge of the status of the halacha in sixteenth-century Italy and its confrontation with various social and cultural forces asserting their pressures on Italian Jewish society. The responsa are also valuable in providing rich documentation for the study of the social history of Italian Jewry. By their very nature, they often deal with unusual, deviant and even bizarre aspects of social behavior, thus providing insight into the existing norms in the Jewish society as well as the temper of the particular time and place.

Yet all of this is not yet realized in Boksenboim’s edition. We are given the building blocks without the completed building. The work clearly represents an auspicious beginning for reconstructing Diena’s social and cultural world, but it is only a beginning. Boksenboim’s fine piece of scholarship elicits the often-raised question regarding editor’s work in general: What precisely is the editor’s responsibility in editing works of historical value? Is his role confined to the careful presentation and annotation of texts or should he set his sights higher to the more formidable tasks of historical analysis and of placing the texts more securely into the larger cultural and social context of Diena’s environment?

A few examples of the relative potential of Diena’s material left largely unexploited by Boksenboim might prove revealing. Two of Diena’s responsa deal with the interesting case of a young man who claimed to have married the daughter of Lazar of Cremona without the father’s permission. The particular incident was only one of similar cases treated with utmost seriousness by a number of rabbis in this region at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Rabbinic prohibition of marriages effected without parental or adult consent was certainly related to moral concern but, as Reuven Bonfil has recently shown, also reflected a social tendency on the part of the highest echelon of Jewish society to prevent others from penetrating its social and economic circle. One suspects that a more thorough analysis of this case along with the much larger controversy over the disputed marriage of Rosa Montalcino (treated by Diena in five responsa and by other rabbis in the incredible number of 75 additional responsa) might disclose more of the pertinent social background of Diena’s era than that described in Boksenboim’s notes on both affairs.

Diena’s responsa, as already noted, also yield a considerable amount of material relating to the social world of Italian Jewry — cases of crime, of deception, and of sexual and other social deviance. Diena’s discussion of an aggressive woman (n. 121) is suggestive of attitudes towards acceptable female behavior in Diena’s society. A number of responsa indicate an ongoing intimacy between Christians and Jews (especially notes 83, 84, 123). Two responsa on the use of the Torah as a healing device provide a good example of the popular culture of Italian Jews in this era (n. 8, 9). Elsewhere Diena described one economic function of Jews who profited from war booty, especially the case of an individual who collected the clothing and weaponry of battlefield corpses (n. 139). There are also responsa on contacts with the land of Israel, communal taxation and regulation, and other aspects of community life.

Even subjects of seemingly mundane interest — questions of menstrual emission, mikveh, oaths and halitah — might reveal to the sensitive researcher something more of the culture of Diena’s society. In short, here is the stuff for a social historian to evaluate, to collate with similar material of other contemporary rabbis (particularly those of other Italian Jewish sub-communities), as well as to compare with the norms and practices of Christian society in sixteenth-century Italy.

(Continued on Page 33)
Kimelman (Continued from Page 27)
denotes "a bird worth (costing only) an isar (Roman as)" not "a bird in a chain."

8. p. 189 C, unclear.

9. p. 189 D, derek 'eres is not "a sanitary rule", see above, p. 187D.

10. p. 189, n. 114, based on the following comment of Finkelstein in Sifre Deut. p. 108, n. 54. "נה אחדים ממשפיע חפצים מדברים ש

Ruderman (Continued from Page 30)
Even from the sole perspective of the history of the halacha, Boksenboim's achievement is limited. There is only a cursory treatment of Diena's halachic approach in the context of that of other Italian rabbis — Colon, Provenzali, and others. Is there a distinctive "Italian" approach to halachic questions which is reflected in Diena's treatment of various matters? At one point, Boksenboim tells the reader that Diena's influence as a rabbi was probably quite limited. If so, might one rightfully ask the editor why he considers his own work of consequence if he has neither assigned any great significance to Diena's responsa in the history of Jewish law nor determined its relative import for reconstructing the society and culture of Italian Jewry?

For the historian of Italian Jewry, the material in the forthcoming volume of Diena's work proves to be even more exciting. It will include valuable information on contemporary rabbinic controversies, on the utilization of Gentile courts by Jews, on such issues as the herem against the entire Jewish community of Reggio, and more. Yacov Boksenboim will have made an important contribution to the history of Italian Jewry with the eventual publication of both volumes of Diena's work. If this fine edition serves to stimulate others to evaluate its material even more critically and more imaginatively, Mr. Boksenboim will have indeed performed an even greater service.

NOTES

1Colon's responsa were published in several editions as early as 1519 with the exception of a few which remained in manuscript until publication in Jerusalem in 170. On Provenzali's responsa, see Shlomo Simonsohn, History of the Jews of the Duchy of Mantua (Jerusalem, 197), pp. 22-73.


3An additional responsa of Diena, not included in this edition, on payment to matchmakers, is found in Ms. Moscow Ginzburg 129, fols. 71v-72v., along with two additional references to his son Jacob Diena, fols. 91v and 92v.

4The reader of this volume will greatly profit by reading it in conjunction with Yuven Bonfil's important dissertation (soon to be published in revised form by Magnes Press), "Ha-Rabbinate be-Italy be-tekufta ha-Rebena." Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1976.


8Diena, introduction, p. 23.