

THE ASCARELLI CROWN IN ROME'S JEWISH MUSEUM, HISTORICAL AND ARTISTIC CONSIDERATIONS AND NON-INVASIVE EDXRF DIGNOSTIC INVESTIGATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Among the treasures of the Jewish Museum of Rome, a crown for the Sefer Torah in embossed silver containing chiselled decorations is particularly important. The crown is splendidly decorated by scrolls and stylised foliage motifs containing the Ascarelli family's coats-of-arms consisting of a tower surmounted by a lion and supported by a second rampant lion.

On the scrolls a dedicational inscription in Hebrew can be read. The inscription is dated 5443 according to the Jewish calendar; this year corresponds to the period between the 3rd October 1682 and the 20th September 1683, a time of fundamental importance in the history of the Roman Jewish community. On the 30th October 1682, in fact, Pope Innocent XI Odescalchi issued an edict by which all the money-lending activities carried out by the Roman Jews were to cease. This law directly affected the Ascarelli family which had come to Rome from Spain following the 1492 expulsions.

In addition to the date mentioned in the inscription, there is also a silversmith's hallmark used in Rome between 1807 and 1809 to be seen on this beautiful piece of craftsmanship.

For diagnostic and archaeometric purposes, an EDXRF analysis, availing of a portable system, was carried out on the crown which recently underwent conservative restoration. Besides analysis of the silver carried out to determine the quality of the alloy, several other analyses were conducted to determine the composition of possible welding work. The presence of sulphur on the surface of the crown helped explain the degradation of the silver. In this report the historical, artistic and scientific results are provided together with the considerations concerning the restoration work carried out.

HISTORICAL-ARTISTIC CONSIDERATIONS

Among the many treasures housed in the Jewish Museum of Rome there is a crown decorated with biblical scrolls of such interest that restoration was financed by the parents of David Ascarelli on the occasion of his *bar mitzvah* in 2008. As we shall see, the choice is not a random one, since the boy bears the same name as one of the three brothers who seemingly commissioned the masterpiece at the end of the seventeenth century.

The crown, entry n.77 of the "Inventory of Sacred Furnishings in the possession of the Israelite University of Rome and kept in the New Temple's Wardrobe and, which for the sake of greater clarity, classifies them School by School" [*Inventario degli Arredi Sacri di proprietà dell'Università Israelitica di Roma Esistenti nella Guardaroba del Nuovo Tempio e che per maggior chiarezza vengono classificati Scuola per Scuola*] dating 1905, is described as belonging to the Catalan Synagogue and as being "A crown with the silver towers of the Ascarelli family – with tower and rampant lion"; in the 1941 inventory it appears at entry n.38 and is described in similar terms.

The crown is in silver, embossed, fretted and chiselled; it is 18 cm. high, its greatest diameter is 30 cm, the diameter of the base 18.6 cm. The lower band, contained between two circlets of twisted ribbons, bears six scrolls containing inscriptions, alternating with stylised leafy patterns. Above, the body of the crown flares outwards and upwards ending in a mixtilinear edge with recurring festoons and leafy patterns and rigorously specular volutes containing

scrolls bearing the family's coat-of-arms comprising a tower surmounted by a lion and, to the right of the observer, by a second lion, this time rampant: these elements are surrounded by fretwork.

The scrolls bear a celebratory inscription in Hebrew language and script, which in translation reads:

*Blessed to the Lord: they have honoured /the Lord with their patrimony
Gift of Messrs / Shemuel and Ghershon
And David Ascarelli / brothers
For the repose of the soul /of the honoured Mr Izkhaq
Their dearly beloved father/in the year
5443 / according to the lesser computation (1682-1683).*

The inscription which associates the crown with the Ascarelli family, concords with the coat-of-arms, this too connected with the Ascarellis. [1]

Among the right-hand volutes of one of the coats-of-arms we find the silver hallmark used in Rome during the 1807-1809 biennium. [2]

The Jewish year 5543, in which the crown was donated, corresponds to the period between the 3rd. October 1682 and the 20th. September 1683, a moment of fundamental importance to the history of Rome's Jewish community. On the 30th October 1682, infact, Pope Innocent XI Odescalchi issued an edict ordering that all the money-lending banks run in Rome by the Jews should be closed. This decree directly affected the Ascarelli family which had come to Rome from Spain as a result of the 1492 expulsions. The list of the Jewish bankers registered in Rome when these licences were revoked names, as fourth richest out of thirty-one, a certain Samuele son of Isacco Ascarelli, whose patrimony amounted to 5.06% of the total wealth of all the Jewish bankers mentioned. Further down the list we find a certain Giacobbe Ascarelli as well as a Samuele son of Pellegrino Ascarelli [3]. Since the dedicatory inscriptions on objects donated by the Roman Jews were recorded with their Jewish names, while in their everyday and professional lives they assumed Italian names which might be associated with the Hebrew equivalent, we may forward the hypothesis that the banker Samuele son of Isacco Ascarelli was the first of the three brothers mentioned on the crown, while Samuele son of Pellegrino Ascarelli might well be a son of the second-eldest brother Ghershon – a name which in the Roman Jewish custom is rendered as Pellegrino. As to the remaining banker, Giacobbe Ascarelli, he might possibly be identified as Iakov son of Shemuel Ascarelli, who in 1680 donated a beautiful *mappah* today housed in the Jewish Museum of Rome (inv.407). If this hypothesis were confirmed, the crown would prove to be an important testimony to the life and taste of the Jewish bankers of Rome in the very year when they were forced to place their professional abilities at the service of other activities.

In fact, after the abolition of the money-lending banks, the Ascarelli family took to commerce. In 1739 we find, for example, an Isacco Ascarelli who, with a certain Sabato Del Monte, purchases valuable second-hand fabrics from the wardrobe at the Pallavicini Rospigliosi Palace. The two merchants did other business with the same noble family, for example they supplied them with the wax they bought at the Farfa fair. The Jewish Museum of Rome also houses a prayer book with its silver binding donated by Stella Ascarelli to the Catalan Synagogue in 1744-1745 (inv. 155), together with a *yad* (inv.190) donated by the same lady or a woman of the same name in 1744, in honour of her husband Jakov Haim and in memory of her son Moshè Izkhaq (the merchant who did business with the Pallavicini household?) who had died the previous year. [4]

The date borne in the inscription, 1682-1683, does not agree, however, with the hallmark which suggests that the crown was made between 1807 and 1809. How can these two different sets of data be explained?

First we must examine the crown from a stylistic point of view. This piece of craftsmanship is typical of the Roman Baroque period, a style still very much alive a few years after the death of its greatest exponent, Gian Lorenzo Bernini, in 1680. A salient feature of this style, which we find in the crown, is the abundant use of volutes and foliage covering the surface of an entire object, and even incorporated into its very structure – in other words objects were not just *decorated with*, but even *made up of* volutes and foliage, intertwining, spreading and refracting light exploited to convey an idea of life, change, metamorphosis; furthermore, the heraldic references in this work are not framed in a coat-of-arms but woven into the decorative elements; finally the typically Baroque quest for three-dimensionality is obtained in this piece not so much by twisting and bulging the metal as by exploiting the optical effect produced by alternating polished and matte surfaces.

There is, nonetheless, something in the crown that does not point to seventeenth-century craftsmanship. I refer, in particular, to the fretting technique used to isolate the Ascarelli family's heraldic figures and which appears to have been carried out in a swifter and coarser manner than the rest. This might mean that the crown was extensively revisited in the nineteenth century relieving the figures so as to confer greater movement and buoyancy on the crown and that at the end of this work the object was officially hallmarked.

Another possible hypothesis is that the crown donated by the Ascarellis in the seventeenth century had deteriorated so much with use that it was melted down and remade between 1807 and 1809. Out of respect for the first donors, the new crown was made availing of the silver from the old one and using a style based on the original, copying the dedicatory inscription in memory of the donation made by the Ascarelli family. Similar cases of objects renovated in this manner are to be found among the museum's exhibits. (For example the *rimmonim* and crown inv. 31- 32, donated by Aaron Di Capua to the Sicilian School in 1770, were renovated in 1832).

In 2007 the Ascarelli crown, for many years exhibited in Rome's Jewish Museum [5], and then in very poor condition, was chosen for restoration not only because of its association with the boy whose family offered to finance the work, but also because of its very bad state of repair.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The piece is extremely complex, thanks to the intricacy of its embossed and fretted ornamentation.

It was made from a thin sheet of silver 22 cm. high and 19 cm. in diameter. In correspondence with decorative element n. 10 is the original joining bearing signs of hammering and the circular silver rivets are clearly distinguishable from the bosses in the acanthus leaves in the decoration.

On the basis of the evidence available, on the interior of the crown one notices a direct correspondence between the concave and convex parts front and back, a feature typical of embossed objects. The main parts are obtained by accurate beating of the inside of the plate using a counter-form mould, but the technique is also applied to the front, so that it is possible

to see, by examining the sharp edges of the circular punch marks or the outlines of the indentations left by the round-tipped chisel used.

The object was made, therefore, by applying frets and bosses, by carrying out considerably refined work on the surfaces, making the volutes smooth and polished, the background areas and acanthus leaves vibrant and matte thanks to tiny clusters of punch marks using a flat chisel. Traces of the metal-beating work which characterises the flat, irregular areas at the bottom of the crown are also worthy of note.

At first sight the crown appears well preserved although it is covered in dents and warped to such an extent as to alter not only the ratio between the various planes but even the circumference of the base, which appears elliptical.

The original colour and sheen of the metal has been dulled by a patina caused by oxidation (or black sulphurisation) and the crown has taken on an orange-yellow tone, the consequence of the ageing of an older protective layer.

To analyse the crown a portable system was used (see Figure 1) working with an X Ray tube tension of 35 kV and a tube current of 0.2 mA; the detector was an SDD (Silicon Drift Detector) with a resolution of 150 eV at 6.4 keV. The areas of the crown analysed had a diameter of 4 mm each.

For greater in-depth information regarding this technique and the Fundamental Parameter Method used to evaluate the spectra and generate the results as in Table 1, please consult the bibliography [6].

CONSERVATIVE RESTORATION

Cleansing intervention was decided on the basis of samplings carried out on tiny areas of the inside and outside of the object using organic solvents and compounding chemical substances. On the base of these findings the orange-yellow and dark patina (probably sulphurs) on the inner and outer surfaces of the crown were removed mechanically and chemically by means of immersions in an EDTA trisodic solution at 8% p/p in demineralised water at a pH of 7, for a duration of about 20 minutes and abrasions using soft dental brushes.

This operation was repeated twice so as to cleanse the piece's extremely elaborate surfaces efficaciously and integrated by further cleaning using a tampon soaked in a bicarbonate of soda and ethylic alcohol solution.

Both operations were followed by careful rinsing in flowing tap-water and non-static demineralised water for periods of 48 hours. The conductivity rate of the tap water after washing were extremely low: 10ppm at a temperature of 19,5°C in a volume of 13 litres of water. The conductivity rate of the demineralised water at the same temperature was 3ppm.

When the crown was deemed to be sufficiently clean it was dehydrated through immersion in pure 15° ethylic alcohol, and dried using a thermo conductor, while the fractures were mended by gluing.

This operation was carried out by applying an epossodic bi-component UHU PLUS 24h ® resin to the areas to be treated. As the parts to be glued were extremely thin the gluing was reinforced by applying a film of polyester resin to the back of the crown and fixing it with a Paraloid B72® acrylic resin at 20% p/p in acetone and where necessary, reinforced with a further layer of epossodic resin to enhance stiffness.

On the outside the gaps were filled with bi-component UHU PLUS 24h ® resin to which silver and burnt earth acrylic colouring was added.

In order to protect the surface of the metal from oxidation by the sulphur dioxide present in the polluted urban environment, the crown was brushed with a layer of Ceronis ® wax, diluted in mineral turpentine and polished using a chamois leather cloth.

RESULTS

After restoration the silver sheet underwent a number of different EDXRF measurements in order to determine the composition of the silver alloy. Various measurements were also carried out on the original rivets and on those used during restoration. Given the uniqueness and significance of the exhibit it was not possible to take samples for SEM/EDS analysis.

In table 1 are the results of the measurements obtained on the basis of the fundamental parameter method.

	Zn (%)	Pb (%)	Cu (%)	Ag (%)	Au (%)
Crown	0	3,9	1,6	94,3	0,2
circular rivet	0	2,2	4,7	92,9	0,2
restoration nail	0,8	2,6	40,5	56,1	0

Table 1: quantitative results for the silver alloy used in the crown and in the rivets.

The values given here are representative of the various measurements of the alloy examined.

The silver content is quite high (over 94 percent). The alloy contains significant percentages of copper and lead, while gold is found as a trace only. As to the nail used in restoration the copper content is very high to guarantee hardness. The nail also contains a relatively low quantity of zinc.

In figure 1 a photograph of the Ascarelli Crown.



Figure 1: The Ascarelli Crown

ENDNOTES

1. D. Di Castro, *Gli stemmi degli ebrei romani*, in D. Di Castro (edited by), *Arte ebraica a Roma e nel Lazio*, Roma 1994, p. 146.
2. A. Bulgari Calissoni, *Maestri argentieri gemmari e orafi di Roma*, Roma 1987, n. 144a.
3. A C. Procaccia, *Banchieri ebrei a Roma. Testimonianze sull'attività di cambio mediante lettera nella seconda metà del XVII secolo*, in "Zackor. Rivista di storia degli ebrei d'Italia", VI, 2003, p. 135.
4. D. Di Castro, *I mercanti d'arte ebrei nella Roma del Sei e Settecento e alcuni loro clienti: papi, principi e la regina di Svezia*, *ibidem*, p.126.
5. F. Pitigliani, *Mostra Permanente della Comunità Israelitica di Roma*, Roma, s.d. ma 1963, p.18, n. 99.
6. R. Cesareo, G.E. Gigante, "Non destructive analysis of ancient metal alloys by in situ EDXRF transportable equipment", *Radiat. Phys. Chem.* Vol 51, No 4-6, pp 689-700 (1998).

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