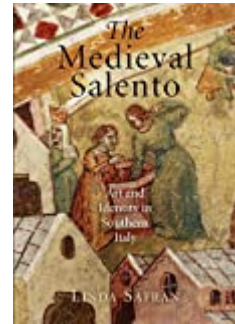


**Linda Safran.** *The Medieval Salento. Art and Identity in Southern Italy.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014. 480 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-4554-7.



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The area that was ancient Calabria, the southern tip of the heel of the boot, was ruled in the post-Roman period by Lombards, Byzantines, Normans, and their successors. The population was in part Latin-speaking, in part Greek-speaking, occasionally Hebrew-, Aramaic-, and increasingly in this period, Latin vernacular-speaking. As Roger II (r. 1130-1154) stated, "a variety of peoples were subjects of our kingdom" (quoted p. 210). The Salento, the southern part of what is now Puglia, makes for an excellent exploration of identity and material culture in this present book. The author, Linda Safran, is a historian of Byzantine art with a record of insightful publications on material from so-called Byzantine southern Italy. She has produced a book that manages to be both useful and provocative, pushing the conventional boundaries of art history beyond painting and sculpture. It is a "real-life" regional microhistory extrapolated from visual and material sources in an area of somewhat Byzantine Italy (p. 13).

The book is thematic, a format which succeeds through Safran's deep familiarity with the visual culture of the place, its local archaeological museums, *biblioteche comunali*, and the region's tiny churches, such as S. Michele Archangelo near Copertino which is now a wine cooperative. The book is divided into three sec-

tions: the first two are analytical; the final one is the database of evidence considered. The introduction makes clear that despite its relatively straightforward title the book challenges each term within the title to complicate and thereby enrich our understanding of "art" and "identity" in particular. In the first instance Safran theorizes identity as the means by which groups recognize each other, explaining the tension that exists between "etic perception," which is imposed from outside an individual or community, and "emic" identity signifiers, which are internally generated, and might respond to challenges. These tensions are explored again in the final chapter.

The first chapter is on names, and how different practices of naming people can relate to different ideas about the nature of life, the soul, and personhood connected with profession or kin. Naming practices of Italian communities have been much studied recently, and Safran focuses her research on the appearance of names in "public texts" or visual sources (inscriptions and paintings) rather than charters, for instance. Thus there are more male names than female, and a rise of Germanic or Norman names (Hugh, Roger, Margaret, Donna) from the twelfth century, but both Latin-speaking and Greek-speaking peoples used Nicholas and Michael in honor of the saints.

The second chapter addresses languages and language choices in material culture. The centuries of Byzantine rule in southern Italy left their mark on the material record of the place, with more medieval Greek graffiti, inscriptions, and public texts there than anywhere else, and a comparatively large number of Hebrew inscriptions. Different areas of the Salento had different public languages: Taranto used mostly Latin in inscriptions, but there is evidence for bilingualism, even within a single sentence or phrase, throughout the Salento.

Chapter 3 examines appearance, using mostly the depictions of contemporary people, their dress, hairstyles, beards or lack thereof, and how these related to confessional identity and status. The findings are less conclusive than historians might have imagined: Greek monks were not always bearded, Jewish laymen neither, and despite the canon of the Fourth Lateran Council declaring that people of different faiths should be visually distinguished by their clothing (so that Christians did not have intercourse with Jewish or Saracen women inadvertently [quoted, p. 84]), there is little visual evidence for separate clothing practices before the end of the Middle Ages.

Chapter 4 analyzes status in representations, including dress, occupation, and graffiti with heraldic shields. Much of the analysis here relies on supposition, inevitably, as status is relative and situational, but Safran makes the reasonable point that signs of honor and icons of power were used and even valued in the churches of the Salento (p. 98). These chapters all relate to the contents of the database, the inscriptions and paintings of contemporary people (located mostly in places of worship). Safran has amplified these data with other paintings of biblical scenes and saints, book arts, and documentary evidence. In the next section she imagines daily life based on material culture, reconstructing what the painted people actually did and ... their beliefs (p. 118). These are theoretically informed and genuinely fascinating explorations of village life in agricultural society, between several languages and different faiths.

Chapter 5 reviews the life cycle—that is, phases of people's lives through the rituals they employed to mark them. Safran brings out the richness of beliefs and layers of meaning among the people she has studied, both official rituals structured around biblical narratives—the Nativity and birth of John the Baptist, Purification, Baptism, and Schooling, for example—as well as more popular rituals around confirmation of virginity at marriage, burial, and mourning. The differences between these two regis-

ters are developed in the next two chapters.

Chapter 6 considers ritual and practice within places of worship. In this chapter, the official liturgy celebrated by professional religious men, whether Orthodox, Roman-rite, or Jewish, is given short shrift in comparison with a wide range of para-liturgical practices such as weighing (*kampanismos*) at the templon barrier or portal of the church in fulfillment of a vow (pp. 148-149). This is a particularly rich chapter conveying a strong sense of how images, lights, and the power of the saints animated churches and the frame provided by professional religion. Safran elsewhere makes clear that Jewish theologians of the Salento really objected to the idols of the gentiles (p. 191), given some indication of just how much attention Christians lavished on the saints and their depictions. Chapter 7 considers ritual and practice outside of places of worship, though confusingly her evidence for this comes from depictions and inscriptions of people in the places of worship that constitute her data set.

In chapter 8 Safran tackles the heart of the matter, determining the existence of a Salentine identity and whether any of the themes explored previously generated separate or shared identities. She determines that there is very little visual evidence for a distinct ethnic identity, though there is rather a lot of textual evidence for people distinguishing themselves from people of different ethnicity or place of origin. The different groups of the Salento were in constant contact, and Safran points out that the different terms that have been used to describe this process, such as influence, appropriation, transculturation, or hybridity may each accurately describe processes transpiring simultaneously in this fluid society. There was also resistance to cultural contacts, a hardening of boundaries in response to others, but among these people there was a common thread, a Salentine identity.

The text is followed by a database, organized by place, entitled *Texts and Images Informative About Identity*. From this was omitted images that do not have pictorial or textual representations of contemporary people (p. 16). In the database are some very well known monuments such as the Otranto cathedral; other items were small and un-monumental in the Middle Ages and remain mostly unknown and unpublished. Safran's decades of research comes to the fore here, with robust bibliographies and high-quality photographs. This resource will hopefully provide resources for much further work in this area and makes accessible this corpus even to undergraduate students.

This is an excellent study, well executed. It self-consciously steps outside of Byzantine art historical discourses, usually focused on hieratic images and relation to empire. From the Salento, the imperial court was distant and perhaps irrelevant. Safran seems invested in thinking about the Agency of Things—something of a trend among art historians—demonstrating the ability of paintings and inscriptions to convey meanings beyond their immediate depictions and texts. Her main historiographical poles are, however, Byzantine art history and southern Italian local and regional studies. Early in the book she declares her allegiance to “New Historicists and anthropologists” [read: Geertz’s] “thick description” providing a footnote reference to the debates around Italian microhistory (p. 13). The research for this book certainly coincided with the broadening out of history as a discipline and a greater concern among art historians to situate works of art closely in their historical context, as well as the rise of microhistory (not always called such in North America). She was undoubtedly informed by those different strands of scholarship. Methodologically, however, her work really is quite distinct from the methods and aims of microhistory, and it does not hold up to the comparison. Safran does, in some ways, attempt to cut across ethnocentrism and to relate the political to the social, and she seeks to uncover the lives of “regular” individuals—at least those privileged enough to appear in public texts or images. But her work does not treat the *eccezionale-normale*, or contextualize an apparently irregular event.<sup>[1]</sup> In one further key way Safran’s study differs from the kind of historicist and microhistorical research with which it seeks to be aligned. Because of the close focus and limited range of evidence, Safran has used all documentary sources available to her from the Salento and sometimes further afield to contextualize the works of art and inscriptions upon which she focuses. This has lent her analysis of the images a certain disconnection from specific historical contexts. For example, she refers to the Chronicle of Ahima’az (mid-tenth century) many times, but in her database there are very few things of that period indeed. More of the material in her database comes from the later Middle Ages, the thirteenth century or later. Her use of later texts for earlier images is rather problematic, too. Early modern collections of proverbs and modern (dialect) proverbs that she happens to know are of limited applicability when interpreting medieval images, such as the season mosaics

at Otranto (pp. 177-179). Rather, the citation of these texts adds another layer of questions about, for example, the sources of the proverbs, and just what she intends by supposing cultural continuity from the Middle Ages to now.

The other most perplexing yet interesting aspect of this book is its “affirmative action on behalf of the Jewish residents of the Salento” (p. 14). A significant portion of the book concerns Jewish lives and sources, and among the database are a great many inscriptions in Hebrew or recording Jews. She is right to give prominent space to Jews of different rites within her story that would otherwise be dominated by Christians of essentially two rites, Orthodox and Roman. It is clear that in the Salento (and perhaps for much of southern Italy) villagers of different confessions shared communal bathing facilities, women nursed children from other confession-based communities, and everyone shared a visual culture and certain understandings about space, power, and presence. But the affirmative action, as she called it, means that it is impossible for the reader to know how widespread the Jewish version of the Salentine identity might have been, in how many towns there was a Jewish community, or how meaningful the Jewish communal identity might have been in contexts where there were not any Jews. A book on Jews in the medieval Salento would have been read by a different audience, and might have failed to drive home the point that Jewish, Orthodox, or Roman-rite populations drank from the same wells and understood their images and inscriptions in similar ways. This book does make that point, but might over-represent the Jews of the Salento as being greater in presence than they were. Regardless of whether it accurately represents the presence or absence of Jews in societies, this is a deeply useful book, making plain its evidence base, and drawing upon it to examine core concerns not just for the contemporary historian but issues that were significant and meaningful for all medieval societies in the Salento.

#### Note

[1]. Consider the recent reflections of F. de Vivo, “Prospect or Refuge? Microhistory, History on the Large Scale: A Response,” *Cultural and Social History* 7, no. 3 (2010): 387-397.

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