

Abruzzo Judaica

by Matthew Larcinese

Starting with fragments and clues, and after 16 years of intensive research into the origin of my family surname in Gessopalena, in the Abruzzo region of Italy, I have finally uncovered the real history of my family in the late 16th century. This was accomplished in 2018 as a result of Y-DNA analysis and continued private, state, archdiocese and local parish archival research. In order to reach this milestone, the precise and meticulous archival research I conducted and analyzed back to the late 16th century and which I have safeguarded for all of these years first had to be unraveled. This article describes the research and the results.

In the summer of 2018, I included my Y-DNA in the grouping “Levites of Europe” in FamilyTree DNA’s J-L24 group. This initiated a new path of research into the potential Jewish subculture that once existed not only in the town of Gessopalena, but also in the surrounding villages. It did not require the total abandonment of thousands of docu-

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ments and archives I had personally digitized and spent years studying, but rather what was needed was a change in context (and my understanding) of these ancient texts, along with a multidisciplinary approach. The new direction included analysis of Y-DNA from volunteers in Gessopalena and nearby villages, along with a search for signs of a Jewish culture. Analysis of the Y-DNA and the texts have opened doors and provided me with additional references and facts that cannot be shrugged off as coincidence, but rather need to be reviewed and examined in their entirety to better understand the influence of new Christians on the one-time Jewish culture in this area of Abruzzo.

My initial attempt to gather Y-DNA in early 2018 was merely to try to understand my surname origins by identifying specific Y-DNA matches, but it is the analysis of the DNA, the tie to my own lineage and ancient Jewish Y-DNA lines, that prompted me to continue to collect samples of Y-DNA from men in Gessopalena and other villages. At the time of this writing, I have analyzed 23 samples; I expect my April 2019 trips to Abruzzo will double this number as I encourage other individuals in the areas where I have discovered an ancient Jewish presence to test their Y-DNA.

Early Abstraction

The approach I took to my genealogic research was conventional; start with the living ancestors, compile all of the

photographs and information available, then start working in the archives. My interest was in the history of my Italian family and my great-grandfather Francesco Larcinese, who emigrated from a small town in Abruzzo called Gessopalena in 1909, settled in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and eventually opened a grocery store in Glassport, Pennsylvania, in 1925.

In the 1990s, my early efforts at accessing LDS (Mormon) microfilm were limited, and letters and telephone calls to “anyone named Larcinese” in Gessopalena left holes in the direct lineage, as well as any connection to anyone in this small mountain town. Going to Gessopalena in 1994 and spending the afternoon with a person named Larcinese gave me a perspective of the city and a very generic understanding of the history of the town; the archival information I needed to make a link to the local municipality had been destroyed.

I packed the project up and did not return to it until 2004, but this time I went onsite to Italy and directly to Gessopalena. Accessing the state and notary archives in Abruzzo was my priority and a task that required several trips. The discovery of a will and testament in the state archives of Lanciano, which contained notary documents from late 16th-century Gessopalena, changed the course of the research. In the Archivio di Stato di Lanciano (Viale Cappuccini), which since has closed because of a fire, I was able to consult two books of the earliest notary collection available in Gessopalena, the notary Claudio Paglione: Volume I, 1580–1592 and Volume II, 1594–1609. The will and testament of the earliest Larcinese in Gessopalena at the time, Bernardino de Larcinese, read like a blueprint for continued research. The document not only enumerated dowries, but detailed the lands owned, who they were to go to upon death, who lived on the land next to them—and even more importantly, his brother and another Larcinese who is believed to be a brother as well.

The part that was most notable was the ownership of a small area translated as Colle dell’Arcinni (Paglione, 1580a). I had already understood that the “ese” ending of my surname defined a geographical region. Much like the word Chinese refers to a person from China or Japanese refers to a person from Japan the “ese” suffix in my name could be used the same way. Thus, finding my family living in an area of Arcinni was significant as it could be a clue to the origins of my surname. (Fucilla, 1949)

My first trip back to Gessopalena after this discovery led to the discussion of this will and testament with some distant ancestors and the town historian who immediately identified the area as l’Arcinni. In typical Abruzzese hospitality, hours after my arrival I was on a tractor with these *Gessani*, traveling down a dusty valley road that ran parallel to the cliff-top city of Gessopalena. As I viewed the old

homes, overgrown and perhaps one-time productive olive groves, Domenico, the tractor operator, waved his hands as we passed by the vacant terrain and yelled out, “Arcioni! Arcioni!” indicating “this is the area from the will and testament.”

At the bottom of the road, we exited the tractor and walked among the stone homes and ruins of unknown structures. This area was and is known as Piano Mulino and in the area I came to understand as “*la valle*” (the valley), which is a part of the much larger *valle l’Arcioni*. The area of Piano Mulino also reflects my “clan” or nickname in Gessopalena. The Larcenese family is divided up in several clan names with Mulino deriving from the oldest son of Paolino Larcenese, born in 1690, a *massaro* (a land owner who collected taxes) in Gessopalena (Furlani, 1998a). Documents also provide proof that he was a money lender and tax collector for Prince Caracciolo, the royal family from Naples that ruled from a branch of their family in the Abruzzese town of Villa Santa Maria from the 16th century until 1806 when feudalism was abolished (Gualtieri, 1733). The Mulino lived in the valley for two centuries, and the family started to disperse as my great-grandfather did in 1909, followed by others of the Mulino clan who went to Switzerland and Belgium, leaving behind this small neighborhood and fields of olive trees, figs and blueberries.

Despite this glaring clue of Arcioni, my inexperience drew upon the paleographers, linguists and archivists in Abruzzo who had their own ideas about the origin of the Larcenese surname. The consensus was the name Larcenese originated elsewhere, and when bearers of the name settled in the area, they named the valley after the area they came from originally, as homage to their roots. For me this was an exciting endeavor and there were several ideas conveyed by Abruzzese researchers, archivists and linguists on where the name could have come from in Italy. Looking at the root, Arcinni, or Arcene, I began to research in Italy and in the United States areas where this given or last name or person might have originated.

The first idea suggested by these researchers was the town of Arcene, Bergamo, Lombardia, Italy. The obsession of trying to find my surname led me to take several yearly trips to Italy where I used Gessopalena as my home base. I would launch off from there on trips throughout the country, visiting state archives and staying in the towns in question (many places more than once) while I tried to find the “smoking gun” document that could tie the two areas together.

At this time, I began to contact Larcineses in other countries related to me through distant relatives but part of the “clan” that had lived in the Mulino Valley. With careful document research, an accountant, lawyer and *geometra*, (person who identifies, measures, and evaluates land ownerships), I was able to establish and purchase parcels of land in the Piano Mulino as well as in other hamlets around Gessopalena at the notary in the nearby town of Lanciano. The process was time consuming but, in the end, allowed

me another reprieve, as I would work on “liberating” the olive orchards grown in and over by other plants and trees. This was my weekend work between visiting state archives in Milan, Florence, Venice and Naples, as well as searching archdiocese and church records in Gessopalena.

Putting My Research to the Test

Amid archives and records and perfecting the research with concise documentation, I took my first DNA test. The test was through 23andme. I did not have much experience with this process and could not fathom what the test results could provide. The results came back with an ancestral breakdown, which I would expect, given my great-grandparents’ reported origins. The test, however, also provided me with Y-DNA and mtDNA haplogroups. My interest was the Larcenese Y-DNA haplogroup, but it could not tell me more than that I am in the J-M172 haplogroup. While that was mildly interesting, I did not think much beyond the obvious.

Looking for more information online, I turned my attention to the Y-DNA-specific testing at FTDNA. I ordered the Y-37 marker, which paralleled the 23andme test in reporting the haplogroup J-M172. In the course of conversations with the many special groups FTDNA offers to assist with further testing, I started to take specific marker tests to see what branch of J-M172 I was. Once I received the results as J-L24, I worked with the group administrators who, using other testing companies such as YSEQ, a company established to sequence Y chromosomes to further explore Y-DNA, were able to work down the Y-DNA tree to J-Z435+, Z2177+. Analysis of the markers suggested my ancestry was Jewish.

My initial reaction was divided. On one hand I was thrilled that there was a specifically defined haplogroup for my lineage; on the other hand, with my document-driven research back to the late 16th century, I could not understand how a Jewish person would fit into the narrative of Gessopalena—an area filled with churches and monasteries. Without any further clues or knowledge of a Jewish presence in the area, I filed it away and continued my archival pursuits.

I had no other specifics at this time as I was in a very isolated group. My family in Gessopalena, as far as I knew, owned a tremendous amount of land in the 16th century at least. The only evidence of activity I can find about this family throughout the 16th and 17th centuries is that they bought and sold land, made wills and testaments and had dowries. It is not until Paolo, the moneylender, do we see any hint of a profession that eventually evolved into the “Mulino clan” that managed the grain grinding mills in the area.

In 2015, I returned to do more archival work. Because I wanted to understand my Y-DNA and make sure it was truly a Y-DNA for the Larcenese family, I tested two additional lineages of Larcenese; one left my direct lineage in the early 1700s while the other had been part of my Mulino

clan, but split in 1850. The results all came back to match my own Y-DNA. The Larcinese Y-DNA was identified at least as far back as the early 1700s with the common ancestor Paolino Larcinese, born in 1690, a moneylender and tax collector for Prince Caracciolo.

Over the past few years I have been working on theories and chasing ideas, but still remaining close to Abruzzo. When I began my research in 2004, I consulted and relied on the experience and knowledge of Italian linguists, archivists, and research professionals who had already been researching in Italy for years. Now enough time had passed and my knowledge had reached a point where I wanted to test my own theories, one of which was that my surname came from the valle Arcione, and it was a “home grown” surname that evolved in the 16th century from another local surname.

In 2014, I started to digitize the archives in Gessopalena. This archive is kept in the Church of Santa Maria dei Raccomandati in the main piazza of Gessopalena. The archives consist of hundreds of volumes of books of baptism, confirmation, marriage, and death records dating from 1598 to 1955. The digitization is an ongoing project, my first endeavor being to photograph the 25 volumes of baptismal records. Having received the keys to the archives from the parish priest, I spent hours photographing each book, page-by-page, from cover-to-cover, each 300 to 400-page volume, starting with the oldest first.

When I was not in Italy, I looked for clues in the books, scrutinizing each act on my desktop back home. The indexes found in each book only revealed one new baptism for Larcinese that I did not already have in my files. It demonstrated, however, a variant spelling I could not dismiss as a coincidence. I found an alternate spelling for my surname, which was the way I thought my name would originally have been spelled, and this spelling brought me full-circle back to the Arcioni Valley. The surname in the baptismal records was spelled di *Larcionese*—a person from l’Arcioni (San Valentino, 1601). I started to look at each act and note the godparents listed at the end of each individual act in the earlier baptismal records. In a 1608 baptism act, I found the surname again spelled as Larcionese. This time Giovanni Bernadino de Larcionese was the godparent. This was a significant discovery; I now had written proof from the church documents that my surname more than likely stemmed from the land my family owned in Valle l’Arcioni.

The continued research in my digitized Paglione notary documents also demonstrated that he was notorious for leaving I’s out of names and often omitted vowels completely. I found entries where he omitted the initial “L” and spells my name Arcenese, other times it is Lannutti or Lannuto. Going back to the document from 1580 and Arcinni, we can see here as well that the notary omits an “o” while the church records were more meticulous.

I used the trip in April 2018 as an opportunity to gather Y-DNA test samples from the men in Gessopalena in an

effort to understand each of their origins. The notary act of 1645 (Sirolli, 1645) mentions the act of Giovanni Nicola Turchi (Turco) being written in the house of said Giovanni who lives in the Contrada dell’Annunziata (a specific area in Gessopalena where Prince Caracciolo lived), but precisely on the “la ruga dell’Arcinese” (the small road of the Arcinese). The location of this road had been shown to me years earlier by the historian in Gessopalena, who added that the house on the corner of this “road of the Arcinese,” was the main Larcinese house mentioned in the will and testament of Bernardino de Larcenese in 1580. The road was further defined in 2010 by a *geometra* (surveyor) in Gessopalena who spent the day with me and my ancient documents, taking me to each area discussed in the original will and testament from 1580.

At one time, this road of Arcinese extended from Gessopalena to the valle l’Arcioni below. Because of the Turchi presence on this road, I wanted to test the Turchi family that still lives in Gessopalena. Looking for another path forward in my research by using Y-DNA research, I started to consider other families that lived on or near the Arcioni who may have inherited the de Larcionese surname. Turchi was my primary interest. I considered the act and children of Giovanni Nicola Turchi perhaps, living on ruga dell’Arcinese, being referred to as the family of “Giovanni Nicola Turchi dell’Arcinese.” I wondered if the name of this clan could have, in some way, evolved into “de Larcenese.” The other names I wanted to test in Gessopalena had ancestry tied to this area of dell’Annunziata and also valle l’Arcioni. Understanding their origins through Y-DNA analysis might reveal that the families were related and give me a broader scope with which to explore my surname.

While I was in Gessopalena, a man whom I have known for many years and who lives in Gessopalena wrote to me via social media. Inspired by my posting of my Y-DNA and history online, he took his own DNA test to see what he might learn about his lineage. We met and he shared his results with me. His haplogroup J-Z1297 was unknown to me, but it was interesting to find another man with a J1 haplogroup. I did not have him on the list of men to test, but once he shared his results with me, I wanted to include him in the project I was forming of similar Y-DNA samples so I could see whom, if anyone, he matched in Gessopalena. An autosomal DNA test he had taken showed small signs of the Jewish Diaspora on FTDNA’s Family Finder test; this was magnified to 23 percent Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jewish once he received his results from a separate MyHeritage test. His Y-DNA results also were interesting because he has lived in Gessopalena his entire life. His ancestors also were isolated in the town of Gessopalena and surrounding villages. Only a few outside families, which we have identified as coming from Guardiaagrele, a town 15 miles from Gessopalena, have entered into the lineage. Our meeting motivated me to start to learn more about the Jewish presence in the area. As I started to peel back the layers, I began

to rethink my own origins as well as the legends and history of Gessopalena.

Exposing the Jewish History

Information was scarce but compelling. In Roccascalegna, a small town four miles from Gessopalena, where the Lombard castle was rebuilt in the 14th century, the gate tower was affixed with two stones with menorahs carved in them. (Roccascalegna, 2018) Current analysis of the stones suggests that they were not part of the original castle structure, but were borrowed from a nearby structure or tomb. Fifteen miles from Gessopalena is the town of Guardiagrele, where a Jewish settlement is mentioned in the books as early as 1269. Early 19th-century documents reveal roads in this town named Strada del Ghetto, Via Morena (Morena meaning dark-skinned, of Middle East descent), and Strada degli Ebrei (Street of the Hebrews) (Guardiagrele, 1809). I will visit this area next month with the hope of obtaining Y-DNA from men who carry names that were known in the Jewish neighborhood of Guardiagrele.

Twenty-five miles from Gessopalena is the town of Lanciano whose history dates back to the Roman period. The merchant markets in this town once rivaled those of Venice, attracting people from all over the Mediterranean. The historian Ludovico Antinori has written a timeline of the Jewish presence in Lanciano, which predates the year 1000 and discusses the area of Lanciano where the Jews were confined as Giudecca (believed to be a corruption of the Latin, Judaica and also, Judaic or Jewish). (Lanciano, 2019) My efforts to analyze this area will include a walk through the old neighborhood with the historian of Lanciano as well as key Y-DNA analysis from the oldest families who still live there, testing the surname found here which parallels the name found in Gessopalena. The Paglione acts of Gessopalena included many men from Lanciano (di Lanciano, di Lanzano appearing after their surname), some who were working with other shop owners in Gessopalena. Thus, a commonality existed that I hope to clarify with continued document research and Y-DNA testing. Names such as Pesce (Peschi) and Camerino, present in Lanciano, also appear in the early Paglione documents in Gessopalena.

While I waited for the new DNA kits, the group administrators from FTDNA posted a list on the J-L24 wall entitled, the "Levites of Europe." Included in the list of names was Larcinese.

Each of the other men whose Y-DNA I wanted to test, had a story about which I wanted to know more. Melchiorre, one of the historians in Gessopalena, believed his surname and lineage was Sephardic Jewish; Salamone (Solomon) was interesting, as his surname may have demonstrated an early Jewish meaning, and De Gregorio whom I mentioned above. Y-DNA tests showed that Melchiorre, Salamone (Solomon) and De Gregorio, all had the same haplogroup, J-Z129, although none of them were known to be related.

Working with my documents, I also discovered that these families all seem to live solely in the same hamlets of

Gessopalena. Various acts in the 1747 census of Gessopalena (Furlani, 1998b) demonstrate that they lived in an area called Pastini, Aravecchia (area of the old) and Triani, all hamlets of Gessopalena on the Roccascalegna border. One person from Roccascalegna who took the Big Y test at FTDNA, de Loreto, also was present in Pastini. All four of these men, Melchiorre, Salamone, De Gregorio and de Loreto although seemingly unrelated, share the Y-DNA haplogroup Z1297. The Gessopalena census also listed De Gregorio, Salamone and Melchiorre as wool workers.

The Paglione documents also show that the 16th- and early 17th-century Melchiorres living in Gessopalena were two brothers; Nunziato was the archpriest of Gessopalena, the other, Antonio, was a moneylender. The documents of the di Loreto family in Roccascalegna demonstrate that di Loreto was a moneylender for Corvo de Corvis during the Spanish era. Knowing that money lending was a Jewish occupation in earlier times, I started to look at other early moneylenders in Gessopalena (not just my own), and discovered that the men who were not wool workers or involved in high positions in the church were moneylenders. I feel there is a tie here.

Y-DNA test results also showed a match to my Y-DNA, and someone with the surname Tiberino who is also J-PH185. This is highly significant because the surname Tiberino, like Larcinese, has been (and still is) found in the Valle Arcioni to this day. The results reveal what I was hoping to find with the Y-DNA testing, other families who share the same DNA and perhaps the same origin. This might allow me to branch out and discover relevant documents in archives where there are no more Larcinese surnames. Perhaps the inclusion of the Tiberini added to my research will reveal more clues about a former Jewish presence in the area.

I have conducted 21 Y-DNA tests since April 2018. A few of the results include a departure from the J haplogroups I found in the first eight tests. I have discovered two R and one G haplogroups, which are being tested deeper to see if we can understand the origins of these various lineages. Initial results for the four men I tested last year with the surnames Turchi (of Turkey), Persiani (from Persia), Troilo (local legend states the progenitor was from the battle of Troy), and Innaurato (Inaurato and Naurato—perhaps from the Latin, Inaurate; gilder of gold, golden) all show the same common ancestry in the last 1,000 years, but their origin still is unknown. These four match two other men from Lanciano with the surname Caporelli. Those with the surname Naurato, as we find it written in the 17th-century baptismal acts for the surname Innaurato, have a presence also in the coastal town of Fossacesia, a town near Lanciano.

New Discoveries of an Ancient Past

There is a multidisciplinary approach to this prosopographical research. In lieu of any documents demonstrating a direct Jewish lineage at this time, I am using Y-DNA

analysis to reconstruct the past, while investigating clues and leads provided in the ruins of these towns. This is only the beginning and I anticipate other documents and opportunities to come to light as I progress.

Next month, I will visit nearby towns, looking through the ruins and homes in the areas of Pastini and the hamlets around the menorah stones of Roccascalegna which now lay in ruins. I also will examine the remains of 13th-century monasteries and 15th-century churches, some long destroyed. The archives also need to be reexamined, as I did not make a Jewish presence the center of my previous research. I will now reexamine the notary books at the state archives and the commune archives in the villages surrounding Gessopalena, plus start a dialogue with the locals in the hope someone will remember something they saw or heard about a lost Jewish past.

Y-DNA analysis has changed the course of my research and injected a new energy to forge forward with vigor and enthusiasm. While I have been looking under every possible “stone” for specific surname leads throughout Italy, the Y-DNA results and the documents so far uncovered show a Jewish presence in these towns. This has paved the way for more specific and targeted research to open new doors and provide critical materials in my search for clues to a past Jewish life in the area. The past six months’ research has proven to be paramount to the search for clues of Jewish life. It is no longer a matter “if” the Jewish culture existed in Gessopalena and the surrounding villages, but when, for how long, and what contributions did they make to the overall landscape of the towns.

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