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## The Sicilian Jews in the Maritime Trade in the Second Half of the 15th Century

Evidences of Jewish settlements in Sicily date back to the late antique period and this varied and industrious minority has been present, without interruption, until the last decade of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The Sicilian Jews lived closely linked to the majority around them, they settled in the three “valli” in which the island was parcelled out and especially in the main coastal cities. Many communities, indeed, grouped around big urban centres and only few of them were situated in suburban areas, even if they were not completely isolated, and many inland communities settled along the main communications lines. The Sicilian Jews devoted themselves to diversified professions; they were physicians, silk weavers, blacksmiths, small artisans, shopkeepers and merchants of several items: cloths, silk, spices, metals and metallurgic products, sugar, slaves and so on<sup>1</sup>.

As specified, they never were «shipowners or navigators, but for some exceptional cases»<sup>2</sup> and they took part both in maritime international traffic and in coasting trade, mainly as investors through *commenda* and partnership contracts. The procedure of these traffics can be easily verified by analysing the notarial acts of the most important Sicilian seaports, especially Messina, Trapani and Syracuse and, to a lesser extent Palermo, and some centres with grain chargers, such as Termini Imerese.

The Jews of Messina often established commercial companies, mostly with Christian fellow-citizens, according to the traditional form of «accomandita ad negociandum». It provided for the consignment of a capital in the form of money or goods from a limited partner to an unlimited partner who should invest or trade it, delivering on the way back the invested value and a part of its profit, according to the contract terms. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century the merchants of Messina had a wide range

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<sup>1</sup> About the Sicilian Jews see *Italia Judaica. Gli ebrei in Sicilia sino all'espulsione del 1492*, “Atti del V convegno internazionale”, (Palermo 15-19 giugno 1992), Roma 1995; N. BUCARIA, *Sicilia Judaica*, Palermo 1997; ID. (ed.), *Gli Ebrei in Sicilia dal Tardoantico al Medioevo. Studi in onore di Mons. Benedetto Rocco*, Palermo 1998; H. BRESCH, *Arabi per lingua Ebrei per religione. L'evoluzione dell'ebraismo siciliano in ambiente latino dal XII al XV secolo*, Messina 2001; N. BUCARIA, M. LUZZATI, A. TARANTINO (ed.), *Ebrei e Sicilia*, Palermo 2003; S. SIMONSOHN, *Tra Scilla e Cariddi. Storia degli ebrei in Sicilia*, Roma 2011; H. BRESCH, *Le judaïsme sicilien, caractères généraux et particularités*, in M. PERANI (ed.), *Guglielmo Raimondo Moncada alias Flavio Mitridate. Un ebreo converso siciliano*, Palermo 2007, pp. 1-22.

<sup>2</sup> S. SIMONSOHN, *Tra Scilla e Cariddi*, cit., p. 421

of action. They travelled, continuously and quite intensely, to North Africa (mainly Tunisia and Libya), the great Mediterranean islands, especially Chios, Constantinople and the East in general; but also, to the Adriatic Sea, Venice above all, and Catalonia and Flanders on the western side. At the same time, they were in contact with all the Sicilian and Calabrian ports, until Ionian Apulia and Campania<sup>3</sup>.

In the second half of the century, the Jews loaded goods in their commercial journeys to Flanders where the dealers of Messina set off on Venetian ships. As stated, the journeys to those places on Venetian ships were the most frequented by the merchants of Messina. In fact, several sectors of the society in Messina suffered from a sort of “fever” when the vessels of Venetian traders moored to that port, considering those adventures as an occasion of certain success and easy profits<sup>4</sup>. Between 1470 and 1472, Farachio de Santo Marco, David Ximeon, Iacob Faccas and Siminto Schanino joined as limited partners in the noble Iacopo de Alifia’s journeys, loading spices of several types, calamus, silk, metals and precious stones too<sup>5</sup>.

The Jews of Syracuse, instead, were interested especially in North Africa and Syria. The company established in 1486 by the brothers Chucua and Zaccaria Bracha and Chuna de Catania aimed at trading in Barberia and Malta. The Brachas left to trade oil on Barbaresque coasts sailing on Venetian galleasses, whereas De Catania invested in them twelve *onze*<sup>6</sup>.

In the same year, a trading company was established by the brothers Leon and Gabriel de Messina and Jacob Nifusi who invested the huge amount of 130 *onze*, nineteen *tari* and fifteen grains in goods to be traded in North Africa. They were fourteen bags of silk thread, five Moor slaves, ten rolls of verdigris, two *canthari* of cheese, two and a half rolls of *cucculli*, two cases of *paternostri*, three boxes of

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<sup>3</sup> B. FIGLIUOLO, *Lo spazio economico dei mercanti messinesi nel XV secolo (1415-1474)*, in «Nuova Rivista Storica», 3 (2013), p. 762.

<sup>4</sup> Ivi, pp. 768-72.

<sup>5</sup> ARCHIVIO DI STATO DI MESSINA (ASM), *Not. Leonardo Camarda*, vol. 8, f. 22r-v (13-9-1470): the noble Iacopo de Alifia of Messina, received as *commenda* for his following journey to Flanders a specific quantity of goods loaded on Venetian galleasses in the port of Messina from several unlimited partners; from Farachio de Santo Marco one *cantharus* of pepper, one and a half *cantharus* of incense, 40 rolls of cloves, and a certain quantity of fine silk corresponding to 3 *onze* and 15 *tari*. From David Ximeon, a Jew of Messina, he received 13 rolls of *azoro* and 15 pounds of Eastern coloured silk, one *cantharus* and 53 rolls of calamus, a bale of silk and a *turkisca* case; from Iacob Faccas 100 pipes of silk thread in different colours and 25 rubies. Ivi, ff. 485r-487r (23-9-1473): De Alifia received as *commenda* other goods in order to trade them during his journey to Flanders: from Iacob Faccas 90 pounds of coloured silk in different colours and coloured silk «de Franza», 10 pounds of coloured silk «de cordelli suptilis», 30 pounds of fine twisted unprocessed silk, a small *cantharus* of incense corresponding to the weight of one *cantharus* and 34 clear rolls, 15 pounds of saffron and 2 dozen of silk bags and from Siminto Schanino he received 30 *canthari* of alum.

<sup>6</sup> V. MULÈ, *Judaica Civitatis Siracusarum: vita, economia e cultura ebraica nella Siracusa medievale*, Officina studi medievali, Palermo 2013, p. 79.

pinchbecks, a bag of thick and fine unprocessed silk and five pounds *cannavaciorum*<sup>7</sup>. In 1491, Gaudio de Catania loaded on Leonardo Burgugrimi's ship seventy-five rolls of coriander comfits, hazelnuts and almonds in order to resell them in Barberia<sup>8</sup>.

Some members of an important family in the town oligarchy, the Mermichi or Mirmichi, were interested in the Middle East: in November 1491, Salomon and Merdoc hired a boat from Antonio de Brancato for a trading voyage to Tripoli<sup>9</sup>; that city was also the trading destination of the company established by Iacob Mermichi and Iosep Maschazen in order to sell oil and salt<sup>10</sup>.

From Trapani, the most important port in Western Sicily, local Jews turned their traffics both to Sardinia, the destination of Bracha de Salvato who, on Francesco Serra's ship, carried a cargo of tuna to be sold in the island<sup>11</sup>; and to some centres in Italian peninsula. In fact, many Jews invested goods using *commenda*, for example Sadone Sala was a very active merchant in that kind of trade, he entrusted Matteo Lo Sardo with some shiny coral to be sold in Rome<sup>12</sup>, and he entrusted Andrea Magliocco with four casks of oil and two hundred cowhides which he should sell in Naples<sup>13</sup>. The city was a centre to sell goods also for Lia Rizo, he hired a brigantine to send forty and a half *canthari*<sup>14</sup>, whereas Amirano Barbaroso, who traded Saracen slaves in Tunis<sup>15</sup>, aimed at North Africa.

Iosep Bonet left from Palermo for his trading journeys to Flanders<sup>16</sup> and the city known as Conca d'oro was a mercantile base for foreign Jews, such as Salamon Iuda Beniosep and Isac Abraham from Avignon. They were involved in international trade, as known from a contract of 1482 saying that Isac intended to sail on Venetian ships to deal with France and other places<sup>17</sup>.

The Jews were very active in coasting trade, for example in the area of the Straits of Messina where, in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, men and goods supplied constant

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<sup>7</sup> Ivi, p. 81.

<sup>8</sup> Ivi, pp. 78-79.

<sup>9</sup> E. ASHTOR, *Jews in the Mediterranean Trade in the Fifteenth Century*, in «Hebrew Union College Annual», 55 (1984), pp. 159-178; V. MULÈ, *La comunità ebraica di Siracusa nel '400: aspetti di vita economica e sociale*, in «La Rassegna mensile di Israele», 69 (2003), pp. 59-86.

<sup>10</sup> ARCHIVIO DI STATO DI SIRACUSA (ASS), *Not. Nicolò Vallone*, vol. 10228, f. 12r-v (12-12-1491).

<sup>11</sup> ARCHIVIO DI STATO DI TRAPANI (AST), *Not. Francesco Formica*, vol. 8703, f. 341r-v (12-11-1458): Tuna was consigned as *commenda* from the father, Merdocho, to Artale Toscano.

<sup>12</sup> AST, *Not. Giovanni Castiglione*, vol. 14, f. 170r (2-4-1467).

<sup>13</sup> AST, *Not. Nicolò Cirami*, vol. 8766, f. 124r (24-4-1469): on board the ship of Nicolò de Pavia.

<sup>14</sup> AST, *Not. Giovanni Castiglione*, vol. 116, f. 30r (11-10-1475).

<sup>15</sup> AST, *Not. Giovanni Castiglione*, vol. 4, f. 270r-v (2-7-1456).

<sup>16</sup> ARCHIVIO DI STATO DI PALERMO (ASP), *Not. Giacomo Randisi*, vol. 1156, f. 105v-106r (3-1-1476).

<sup>17</sup> ASP, *Not. Giovan Pietro Grasso*, vol. 1079, s. n. (15-3-1482).

commerce and that city represented the Southern port of Calabria<sup>18</sup>. The Jews of Messina punctually traded with Reggio Calabria and Catona, as known from a list of imports and exports in the period 1476-1481<sup>19</sup> that is still an interesting evidence of traded goods typology. Exports, which were more than imports, reported as main items cotton<sup>20</sup>, linen and seeds, *linusa*<sup>21</sup>, hides of *piluse* sheep<sup>22</sup>, cloths<sup>23</sup> and silk<sup>24</sup> and to a lesser extent food items as chestnuts<sup>25</sup>, almonds<sup>26</sup>, pepper<sup>27</sup>, cheese<sup>28</sup>, eggs<sup>29</sup>, honey<sup>30</sup>, small onions<sup>31</sup>, saffron<sup>32</sup>, capers<sup>33</sup>. The Jews imported sticks for silk production<sup>34</sup>, barrels<sup>35</sup>, paper<sup>36</sup>, but also donkeys<sup>37</sup> and other goods<sup>38</sup>. Among imports there was cotton<sup>39</sup>, cloths<sup>40</sup>, shoes<sup>41</sup>, cooked grape sugar<sup>42</sup>, *caciocavallo* cheese<sup>43</sup>, pepper<sup>44</sup>, vitriol<sup>45</sup> and other goods<sup>46</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> C. TRASELLI, *Da Ferdinando il Cattolico a Carlo V. L'esperienza siciliana (1475-1525)*, Soveria Mannelli 1982, pp. 324-25.

<sup>19</sup> C. COLAFEMMINA, *The Jews in Calabria*, Brill, Leiden-Boston 2012, doc. 191.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*: cotton was exported by: Isac Sacerdoto (6-5-1478); Iosef Sacerdoto (17-7-1478); Arbano, Abramo and Selomo Moscato (...-1478); Sabatino and Selomo Moscato (...-1480); Selomo (6-7-1480).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*: linen was exported by: Siminto (2-2-1478); Sabida (17-5-1478); Iaco Levi (9-12-1478). *linusa* was exported by: Vipera (13-10-1479); Isac Catalano (21-2-1480).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*: exported by: Daniel Romano (15 and 31-10-1477) and (15-12-1477); Vita Sacerdoto (21-1-1478); *maestro* Salo (10-7-1480)

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*: exported by: Aron Sacerdoto (2-6-1477); Abram Sichar (18-6-1477); Vita Sacerdoto (15-4-1478).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*: exported by Abram Levi (25-5-1480).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*: exported by: David Rigitano (15-10-1477); Rubino (4-11-1478).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*: exported by Lo Russo (26-7-1479).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*: exported by Mosè Levi (1477).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*: exported by Abram Sichar (18-7-1477).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*: exported by: Mosè Levi (17-4-1477), Iuse Farachi (2-9-1477) Abram Romano (12-9-1477).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*: exported by Lo Russo (14-3-1479).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*: exported by Nisi Russo (22-2-1480).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*: exported by Iusef (27-11-1478).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*: exported by Sarafino (15-3-1478).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*: exported by: Mosè (17-5-1478); Iosef Sacerdoto (23-5-1480).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*: exported by Gentile Musico (13-8-1478).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*: exported by Isac Sacerdoto (6-5-1478).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*: exported by Iosef Sacerdoto (3-8-1478); Siminto (12-7-1481).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*: exported goods of no specified quality: Murdoc (2-3-1479).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*: imported by Abram Sichar (21-7-1477); Vita Sacerdoto (17-7-1478).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*: imported by Isac Sacerdoto (31-3-1478).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*: imported by Cuchuni (28-7-1479).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*: imported by Abram Sichar (21-7-1477).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*: imported by David Rigitano (17-4-1479).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*: imported by Selomo Moscato (28-10-1479).

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*: imported by Sansono Spagnolo (7-8-1477).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*: imported by: Nissim (2-3-1478); Abram Dari (29-7-1479).

Trapani was also a starting point for Jewish coastal trade: Daniel de Actono carried on the ship of Bartolomeo Ledo, one of his two partners, some cheese to be sold in the whole island<sup>47</sup>. Emanuele, another member of de Actono family, entered into business relations with a man of his same religion from Pantelleria, Xucha Melmeth, and gave him as *commenda* two *cafisi* and a half of oil, and four dozen of caps<sup>48</sup>. Trading relations with Messina were good too; in fact, Sadone Sala and Rafael de Vita from Trapani established a company with Domenico Mollica from Messina to sell tuna and cheese and, consequently, they chartered a ship in order to carry goods to the town<sup>49</sup>. Sala, together with Mordachay Cuinu, entered into business relations with another man from Messina, Andrea Lazaro, in order to deal in textiles in Messina and in the rest of the island shipping them on his brigantine<sup>50</sup>. Mazara was the starting point for inland trade too; in fact, Xibiten Midini, a Jew from Pantelleria, loaded forty-four *salme* of grain and four *tumuli* of beans and the same quantity of chickpeas on Baldassarre de Morsello's ship in order to sell them in the domicile island<sup>51</sup>.

As said before, it was unusual to find Jewish shipowners, for example Busacca de Tripoli and Nissim Sapio, two Jews of Palermo engaged in tuna production in Termini Imerese, shared the possession of a ship anchored in the port of Palermo<sup>52</sup>; whereas a Jew of Termini, called Xibite Spagnolo, owned a boat going backward and forward from Termini Imerese to the port of Palermo<sup>53</sup>. The number of Jews from Trapani owning ships was greater: Lucio Sammi bought a quarter *pro indiviso* of a boat from Pietro Combara<sup>54</sup>; Daniel de Actono and Giovanni Comes shared the cost of the third part of the boat called San Michele<sup>55</sup>; Manuel de Actono owned the third part of a *sagictia*<sup>56</sup> and Xalomo de Tripoli owned a boat sold in February 1492 to Michele de Auchello<sup>57</sup>. It is worth mentioning, even if it is not closely connected with maritime trade, the involvement of the Jews from Marsala and Trapani in activities making a profit from piracy, such as the case of Sala Gazzella of Marsala who, together with six Christian partners, embarked on Nicolò de Aiuto's ship, ready to

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<sup>47</sup> AST, *Not. Benedetto Trussello*, vol. 8688, ff. 49v-50r (28-5-1465).

<sup>48</sup> AST, *Not. Nicolò Cirami*, vol. 8768, f. 95v (24-2-1470).

<sup>49</sup> AST, *Not. Giovanni Castiglione*, vol. 12, ff. 222v-223v (19-8-1465).

<sup>50</sup> AST, *Not. Giovanni Castiglione*, vol. 13, f. 55r (24-3-1466).

<sup>51</sup> AST, *Not. Andrea Polito*, vol. 2816, ff. 339v-340r (2-4-1492).

<sup>52</sup> ASP, *Not. Giacomo Randisi*, vol. 1150, f. 63r-v (11-4-1453).

<sup>53</sup> ARCHIVIO DI STATO DI PALERMO – SEZ. TERMINI IMERESE (henceforth ASP.Tr), *Not. Antonio Bonafede*, vol. 12838, s.n. (17-8-1472): undertook to carry goods for Andrea de Novo, Virardo Giuffrè and Antonio de Laudato.

<sup>54</sup> AST, *Not. Giovanni Castiglione*, vol. 10, f. 28v (27-9-1462).

<sup>55</sup> AST, *Not. Nicolò Cirami*, vol. 8767, f. 4r (11-9-1467).

<sup>56</sup> AST, *Not. Giovanni Castiglione*, vol. 116, f. 82r (9-1-1475).

<sup>57</sup> AST, *Not. Nicolò Tobia*, vol. 8867, f. 278v (21-2-1492).

sail from the port of Trapani, in order to commit robberies<sup>58</sup>. Some Jews of Trapani such as Manuele de Actono<sup>59</sup>, Nissim de Nissim<sup>60</sup> and David from Messina<sup>61</sup> invested money and goods «ad piraticam exercendum in partibus barbaricis».

To conclude, the Sicilian Jews were active in the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century maritime traffic following the same procedures of their Christian fellow-country men, and they often set up partnership with them. The members of *aljame* in seaports mainly exploited ships in transit, especially Venetian ones, to send diversified commercial products both to Flanders, the destination of the traffic from Messina and Palermo, and to peninsular ports of the Neapolitan *Regnum* and Papal States and to North Africa coasts, such as the case of the Jews from Trapani making a profit from piracy too.

The Jews from Syracuse also pushed on as far as Barberìa and traded with Syria. Exports concerned both products available in Sicily, such as oil, cheese, silk and cloths, and goods coming from the East to be sorted out on the island and consigned to Italy and Flanders, such as spices, calamus and so on.

Maritime traffics related to coasting trade routes leaving from Trapani to Pantelleria, Palermo and Messina were very important too. Messina, thanks to its strategic position to control the Straits dividing Sicily and Calabria, was the main linking point of the trade between the island and the mainland.

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<sup>58</sup> AST, *Not. Benedetto Trussello*, vol. 8682, f. 147r-v (21-1-1451).

<sup>59</sup> AST, *Not. Giovanni Castiglione*, vol. 11, f. 28r (3-10-1463): invested in Enrico Li Barbari's journey.

<sup>60</sup> AST, *Not. Nicolò Cirami*, vol. 8768, f. 62r (5-1-1470): invested in Gabriele de Anselmo's journey.

<sup>61</sup> AST, *Not. Nicolò Tobia*, vol. 8866, f. 386r (28-6-1491): invested in Giovanni Bisbirilli's journey.