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Le politique par le bas

Francisco Bethencourt (ed.), *La Diaspora des « Nouveaux-Chrétiens »*

Paris, Publications du Centre culturel Calouste Gulbenkian, 2004, 316 p.
(« Arquivos do Centro Cultural Calouste Gulbenkian », XLVIII)

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- 1 In a forthcoming volume of essays (*Empire in Africa: Angola and its Neighbours*) the present reviewer is heard to complain that not enough is known about the role of Jews in the Portuguese African empire. Such shameful ignorance is brought to light by the brilliant volume of essays which Francisco Bethencourt edited before he ended his distinguished term of office as director of the Gulbenkian centre in Paris. This stunning tome is a dense, scholarly, wide-ranging, path-breaking collection written by specialists for specialists. But it is also a book for those, like the present reviewer, who are woefully ignorant about the diaspora of Jews, New-Christians, Marranos, New-Jews and all the other restless migrants and asylum-seekers that left Portugal, or left Spain via Portugal, in the early modern era. There is matter here to engage everyone, intellectual history, cultural history, musical history, artistic history. There are also essays on all the regions touched by the diaspora, Mexico, Morocco, India, Brazil, the Netherlands, Arabia, France, and not least Tuscany where the port of Leghorn had 3000 Portuguese émigrés in the mid seventeenth century, almost as many as the 4000 in Amsterdam. But the chapter which most vividly drew the attention of this reader was the one relating to Hamburg by Michaël Studemund-Halévy and Jorum Poettering.
- 2 In the early seventeenth-century the Van Dunem family of traders in Angola – ancestors of the ruling families of the twenty-first century – claimed that they had come from

North Germany. With their Dutch-sounding name they wished to avoid being linked to the rebellious city of Amsterdam which was at war with Angola's imperial Habsburg masters. The Sephardic Jews of Hamburg were, at the time, one of the largest communities of Portuguese émigrés in Europe and their sphere of influence stretch from Emden in East Friesland to Danzig and Copenhagen in the Baltic. When they began arriving in the 1590s Hamburg (unlike Amsterdam) was at peace with Portugal. The man-in-the-street, and the Lutheran pastors, did not appreciate the new strangers, but the city Senate enthusiastically welcomed the arrival of men with scarce skills. The "Portuguese", unlike German Jews, were given permission to settle within the city walls and many of them built fine residences adjacent to their commercial premises. Local neighbors were deeply shocked to see Jews riding high in smart carriages driven by Christian coachmen and foot-lackeys, but the ruling class needed Jewish administrative skills to help run their bureaucracy – just as Christian governors in the Portuguese colonies needed Jewish bookkeepers to manage their exchequers. The trades open to Portugal's New Christians, and to its New Jews who had openly reverted to their ancestral faith or even been converted from Christianity, were banking and insurance but they also deal in colonial produce and above all – from the point of view of a city harboring families of noble and even royal refugees – jewelry.

- 3 By 1652 Hamburg – like Angola – had secret synagogues and the three for which records survive had 1,212 adherents. Education was one of the strengths of the members of the diaspora and medical education was especially prized. Officially Hamburg, like Amsterdam, frowned on Christians who resorted to Jewish surgeons and pharmacists though many were French-trained. In 1631 Hamburg officially condemned persons who frequented Jewish or Egyptian (Gypsy) medical doctors but the city élite insisted that "Portuguese" practitioners be exempt from any ban. In addition to practicing the professions the Portuguese were permitted a limited freedom of worship. Preaching was not permitted lest it should subversively lead to the conversion of good Christians, but Jews were allowed to read the Psalms and also the writings of the prophets in the Old Hebrew Testament.
- 4 One day it might be possible to find out more about the religious practices of the Jewish diaspora in Portuguese Africa. The Van Dunems of Emden, for instance, seem to have been active in their new Christian practices in Africa and were at times in dispute with the Catholic church as to whether or not their *mestiço* children should be allowed to ride in the funeral hearse of the Christian brotherhood when being taken to the Luanda cemetery.
- 5 22 March 2006