



Lusotopie

Recherches politiques internationales sur les espaces
issus de l'histoire et de la colonisation portugaises

XVI(1) | 2009

Afrique australe, Afrique lusophone. Mondes
fragmentés, histoires liées

Carmen BALLESTEROS & Mery RUAH (eds), *Os Judeos Sefarditas entre Portugal, Espanha e Marrocos*

Lisbon, Edições Colibri, 2004, 276 p.

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/lusotopie/422>

ISSN: 1768-3084

Publisher:

Association des chercheurs de la revue Lusotopie, Brill, Karthala

Printed version

Date of publication: 30 January 2009

Number of pages: 196-198

ISSN: 1257-0273

Electronic reference

David Birmingham, « Carmen BALLESTEROS & Mery RUAH (eds), *Os Judeos Sefarditas entre Portugal, Espanha e Marrocos* », *Lusotopie* [Online], XVI(1) | 2009, Online since 22 November 2015, connection on 30 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/lusotopie/422>

This text was automatically generated on 30 April 2019.

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Carmen BALLESTEROS & Mery RUAH (eds), *Os Judeos Sefarditas entre Portugal, Espanha e Marrocos*, Lisbon, Edições Colibri, 2004, 276 p., ISBN-13 : 978-9727724857 (for the Associação Portuguesa de Estudos Judaicos and the University of Evora).

- 1 This elegantly written and meticulously researched collection of papers on Jewish history in French, Spanish and Portuguese was presented to a conference in the old city of Evora in 1999 and published five years later. The first solid evidence of a Jewish presence on Lusitanian territory dates from AD 482 when a seven-branch ritual candelabra was pictured on stone. For the next thousand years Jews were an important and integral part of both Muslim and later Christian Portuguese society. They had significant connections with the equally ancient Jewish communities across the narrows in Morocco. They had synagogues and burial grounds in the three main cities of Evora, Lisbon and Santarem. The rabbi of Santarem was an important figure at the royal court as brilliantly illustrated in Nuno Gonçalves' six panels painted in 1445 at the beatification of Prince Fernando and later placed on the alter of the church of São Vicente. Before that date, however, the popular north European antagonism to Jews, a nation accused of killing the Christian God, was reaching the Spanish kingdoms and even seeping into Portugal. In 1361 Pedro I thought it prudent to require Jews to live in segregated city zones. In Evora, the site of whose great synagogue one of the editors of this volume has identified and partially excavated, the Jewish quarter was a prominent and well-protected suburb near the city's main Lisbon gate. Social and economic status were not enough, however, to protect

Evora's Jews from the crises that followed 1480 and in 1505 the great synagogue was burnt to the ground as the ashen timbers of the excavation confirm.

- 2 An influx of asylum-seekers from Spain began in 1480 and initially brought professional skills and economic benefits, though the first hiccup in the Portuguese welcome occurred as early as 1487. By 1492, 20,000 households had crossed the frontiers from the east and the housing crisis was such that Jews were being uncomfortably billeted in Christian quarters of Evora. Riots and other disorders broke out not only in Evora but also in Lisbon and Oporto. João II, under pressure to Christianise the refugee population as quickly as possible, took the Machiavellian decision to separate children under the age of 14 from their parents and send them to Alvaro de Caminho's tropical island off the coast of Nigeria where they could be Christianised while at the same time providing free forced labour to clear the land for sugar plantations. The cruelty was compounded by hunger, disease and eventually death among many of the 2000 captive children and many churchmen were deeply shocked by this mode of conversion. Two years later King João died and the plague hit Portugal once again.
- 3 The new king, Manuel I, was expected to marry his elder brother's Spanish widow, Eleanor. She was much afeared, however, and thought that the plague was God's punishment on Portugal for allowing heretics who had been purged from her Spanish homeland to enter her future husband's domains. Manuel was trapped. The Jews were industrious and educated and they brought a new dynamism to Portugal which he could not afford to alienate. He considered that it should be possible, with carrot and stick, to persuade the immigrants to embrace Christianity, become assimilated and help his kingdom to prosper. Any who were reluctant to do so could be offered a free passage to Morocco and would be given ten months' grace to prepare to leave the king's realm. The royal privy council was seriously divided over the wisdom of the royal proposal. Many pointed out that although England and France were expelling Jews rather than converting and assimilating them, other Catholic kingdoms, including the Papal States, were not condemning Jews to a permanent heretical life by deporting them to the heathen kingdoms of Islam. The royal decree nevertheless settled for conversion or emigration as the policy and was dated 5 December 1496.
- 4 Try as he might Manuel I had only limited success in retaining a community of *cristsãos novos* as the converts were now dubbed. Converted Jews were permitted to enter the universities but were banned from using the Hebrew alphabet and their synagogue schools and libraries were closed. Discrimination between old and new Christians was in theory abolished but 'new' Christians wanting to marry were required to find 'old' Christian grooms or brides. Pressure to convert and conform rose steadily after Manuel's death and in 1536 Pope Paul III decreed the establishment of a Portuguese court of inquisition, though such was the royal desire to retain Jewish wealth and skill that no inquisition case was presented to the tribunal for the next ten years. And still converted Portuguese subjects travelled to Morocco, or emigrated to Morocco, to practice their old religious rites. There they became merchants who exchanged pepper for sugar, goldsmiths responsible for the minting of the coins of the realm, diplomats skilled in bridging the gap between Muslim and Christian kings. Portuguese in Morocco became important arms manufacturers making lances, crossbows and muskets. They helped Morocco and Portugal collaborate in keeping the Ottomans out of the western Mediterranean. Fez, like Evora before it, developed a thriving 'ghetto' though, like Evora,

it has not immune from the plague and in 1558 no less than 1,640 Portuguese died in the Fez epidemic.

- 5 Much later, after the Lisbon revolutions of 1820 to 1851, the racial climate in Portugal lightened and some of the quarter of a million Jews who had settled in Morocco began once more to look for opportunities in their ancestral homelands. Some took part in the building of a new Portuguese empire. José Bensaúde, whose parents hailed from Rabat and Casablanca, became a millionaire dealing in pineapples, tobacco and tea on the Azores Islands before he died in 1922. Others wrote literature and played music. They all feature in this excellent book which demolishes once and for all the old idea that an Iron Curtain ran through the Mediterranean separating Christendom from Islam.

15 December 2007