

# Physicians' and Inquisitors' Stories? Circumcision and Crypto- Judaism in Sixteenth- Eighteenth-Century Spain

*José Pardo Tomás*

And on those who have changed their way of life he said: You will find no rest among the gentiles and your life will hang in the balance ... for, although they have mixed completely with the gentiles, they will find no rest or repose among them, since they will always insult and humiliate them.<sup>1</sup>

These words of Ytzhak 'Aqedat in the book *Devarim Ki Tavo* have been cited many times by investigators of Jewish history. The long and often tormented history of the Jews forcibly converted to Christianity seems to convey a special prophetic value on these words; and it is known that Judaism understands more about prophecies than practically any other religion. However, I have begun with this quotation to propose a slightly different reading. In my opinion, these words were anything but prophetic, at least from the point of view of their immediate historical context. In fact, they were written in Venice, one of the few cities in the West which offered a haven for Sephardim who had refused to convert to Christianity and had abandoned their territory of Sepharad, the Iberian peninsula; on the other hand, these words were written around 1573, after the experience of several generations of Sephardic men and women who, after converting to Christianity, had tried to become integrated into gentile society, and when many of them had suffered the consequences of this attempt, while others had attained their objective. Thus, on the one hand, we can consider that, without a doubt, Ytzhak wanted to warn his co-religionists that it would be of no use to 'change their way of life', that they would always continue to be stigmatized and maltreated by the gentiles, that integration was a chimera, and that the

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<sup>1</sup> Ytzhak 'Aqedat, *Devarim Ki Tavo* (Venice, 1573), p. 262a; cited by H. Graetz, *Geschichte der Juden* (Berling: Arani-Verlag, 1998), vol. 8, p. 317; also in Haim Beinart, *Los conversos ante el tribunal de la Inquisición*, Barcelona, Riopiedras, 1983, p. 13, n. 3.

persecutions of the Inquisition seemed to be an excellent argument in its favour; but, on the other hand, that insistent warning, both by him and by other Jewish writers of his day, was perhaps because it was exactly during those years in the last third of the sixteenth century that integration into Christian society had taken place irreversibly in many cases, the inquisitorial persecutions – after decades of terrible repression – had been considerably decreasing for years, and that relative success was the real cause for concern on the part of Jewish thinkers who feared that it might have destructive effects on the clusters of crypto-Jews who managed to stay on within the frontier of the kingdoms of the Iberian peninsula, and even on the members of the Sephardic communities in exile.

The fact is that it is not very easy to evaluate the results of the attempt at integration that many of the converts of the Iberian peninsula had been engaged in after the terrible pogroms of the late fourteenth century, throughout the fifteenth century, and, under even stronger compulsion, during the first half of the sixteenth century. It is equally difficult to evaluate the extent of clandestine Jewish practices during the three centuries of inquisitorial persecution. They are two sides of the same problem, which, moreover, is not easy to solve, first, because of the risk of distortion which inevitably results from a unilateral reading of the inquisitorial or Hebraic sources, and second, because the more or less confessional historiographical traditions underlying the ignorance – or neglect – of one of these two types of sources, on either side of the debate, have created a series of distorted visions that are still deep-rooted today,<sup>2</sup> in spite of the light thrown on the issue by several outstanding recent scholars.<sup>3</sup>

It is not my intention to launch new general interpretations of this problem here; it is reconsidered here because the context of the

<sup>2</sup> Although the discussion has been going on for decades, it has not died down. For a brief and excellent account of the debate up to the 1970s see: Yosef Hayin Yerushalmi, *From Spanish court to Italian ghetto Isaac Cardoso. A study in seventeenth-century Marranism and Jewish apologetics*, 2nd edn (Washington: University of Washington Press, 1981), pp. 30–42. The actuality of the debate can be gauged from the various reactions to Benzion Netanyahu's polemical *The Marranos of Spain: from the late 14th to the early 16th century, according to contemporary Hebrew sources* (Ithaca, NY, London: Cornell University Press, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> For recent contributions the reader is referred to three monographs that we regard as indispensable and which go beyond the debates mentioned on both sides: Jaime Contreras, *Sotos contra Riquelmes. Regidores, inquisidores y criptojudíos* (Madrid: Anaya-Muchnick, 1992); Pilar Huerga, *En la raya de Portugal. Solidaridad y tensiones en la comunidad judeoconversa* (Salamanca: Ediciones Universidad Salamanca, 1994), and Yosef Kaplan, *Judíos nuevos en Amsterdam. Estudio sobre la historia social e intelectual del judaísmo sefardí en el siglo XVII* (Barcelona: Gedisa, 1996).

integration or non-integration of the convert – a complex matter that is open to discussion – is the necessary framework for the aspect which will be considered in the following pages: the existence of cases of clandestine survival of the practice of circumcision among certain clusters of Jewish *conversos* in the Iberian peninsula from the last decades of the fifteenth century to the first of the eighteenth century. Of course, they formed a very small minority, and the survival of the practice, as we shall see, presents discontinuities within that period; no doubt, too, the phenomenon in question can be considered as something marginal within the complex social history of the *conversos* in the modern era; it may even be declared non-existent, the product of the pathological inquisitorial imagination. But none of these is a reason for us not to view the problems as interesting and worthy of consideration. Whether real or imaginary, circumcision was present in the collective representations that new converts to Christianity and old Christians formed of themselves and of others; whether real or imaginary, the secret sign on this peculiar 'extremity' of the masculine body continued to allow the maintenance of mechanisms of social control and the legitimization of policies of racial segregation; whether real or imaginary, the figure of the *retaxado* (the word is found in many contemporary sources) conditioned the relations of the new converts to the old Christians and their relations with one another.

Another aspect that is interesting in this context is the fact that, at times, the decision on whether this phenomenon really existed or not lay in the hands of clearly circumscribed bodies of professionals: physicians and surgeons. As experts, they could intervene at different moments and under different circumstances. On the one hand, they had access to the manipulation of the body, and especially to those parts of the body that were normally hidden from the view of the majority of people. This power gave them a relatively wide capacity to intervene, and not exclusively to determine the nature of a visible manipulation, but also to perform it. On the other hand, they could find themselves in juridical situations in which, as experts, their diagnosis could save or condemn a person; and sometimes when they were in the position of victims, their knowledge could provide them with convincing arguments in their own defence. Finally, their scientific discourse could offer an 'objective' support to the racial prejudices of the majority of the community and legitimize that discrimination with arguments that had the appearance of being technical and thus 'neutral'. Taking this all into account, therefore, I shall propose a type of approach to this question that is practically without parallel within conventional notions of the social history of medicine.

### The invisibility of the Sephardic Jew

Present-day reflection on the physical stereotype created by anti-Semitic racism in the course of the last two centuries often forgets that it has not always been the same. If the archetype of the Sephardic Jew in writings from the end of the seventeenth century to the ethnological literature of the late nineteenth century, as Sander Gilman reminds us,<sup>4</sup> is his black skin, or if the illustrated physiognomy of a Camper or a Lavater considered a determinate shape of the nose to be unmistakably Jewish, we must not commit the mistake of anachronistically projecting these representations onto other historical contexts.<sup>5</sup> At the time of the decision to expel the Jews from Spain (1492) or to forcibly convert them in Portugal (1497), there was no archetypal physical representation of the Jew based on determinate facial characteristics, skin pigmentation or the shape of the nose. In Sepharad, a Jew was, before and above all else, a *retaxado*, that is, a circumcised man: that was the sign of difference. In all other respects his body was indistinguishable from that of a Christian.

This difficulty of identifying a Jew, in a situation which offered Jews forced conversion to Christianity as the only means of being allowed to remain in their own country, turned the fact of circumcision, which had always been an essential element of difference accepted and imposed by themselves, into a diacritical sign which was now dangerous, had to be kept strictly secret, and which, one may suppose, led the vast majority of *conversos*, from a pure desire to survive in the face of Inquisitorial persecution, to abandon it starting with the post-1492 generation, at least in those territories ruled by the Catholic Monarchs: Castilia, Aragon and, a little afterwards, Navarra. The situation in Portugal, however, was appreciably different from the start, because what was decreed in 1497 was a compulsory and general conversion without the option of choosing exile for those who wanted to maintain their religion and were thus always less inclined to abandon their practices, including the practice of circumcision. On the other hand, as the Portuguese Inquisition did not get under way until the decade 1530–40, the situation of the Portuguese *conversos* was very different from that of their Spanish counterparts.

<sup>4</sup> Sander Gilman, *The Visibility of the Jew in the Diaspora: Body Imagery and Its Cultural Context* (Syracuse: Syracuse University), pp. 5–7.

<sup>5</sup> The Dutch anatomist Peter Camper (1722–89), author, among other works, of *Dissertation physique sur les différences réelles que présentent les traits du visage chez les hommes* (Utrecht: Wild & Altheer, 1791); and the German Johann Caspar Lavater (1741–1801), whose *Physiognomische Fragmente* (Leipzig, 1775), originally published in German, soon circulated all over Europe in French, English and Latin translations.

Before this whole process, however, *conversos* and Jews had coexisted for practically a century since the mass conversions that followed in the wake of the pogroms of 1391. This was the cause of many conflicts and of an almost permanent hostility on the part of the old Christians towards the other two communities. It also triggered tensions and conflicts between *conversos* and Jews as well as among the *conversos* themselves, as some favoured open confrontations with their former co-religionists while others maintained close contacts with them. It is in the latter sector that we find evidence for the maintenance of the practice of circumcision. This provoked continual complaints from the old Christians and assimilated *conversos*, who were responsible for constructing an anti-Semitic image in which the crypto-Jewish practices were presented as being much more extensive than they really were, and where circumcision was specifically singled out from the first as the most incontrovertible sign of the 'falseness' of the *converso*. There are ample testimonies of the maintenance of a continuous climate of alarm in this respect. For example, in 1413 the city of Valencia sent a delegation to the king, consisting of En Joan Suau and Micer Berenguer Clavell, doctors in law, to convey alarming news about the activities and practices of the Valencian *conversos*. The fourth item in their list of five accusations was: 'most serious is that they secretly circumcised their male babies'.<sup>6</sup>

Irrespective of the degree of truth contained in these complaints, they certainly created a very tense climate among the three communities and led to situations which were often terrifying and ended up by involving various social agents, including physicians and surgeons. They were called in by the various parties to confer legitimacy, as experts, on certain cases that, depending on how they were presented, could be connected with the religious practices of the individuals or, simply, with pathological processes or congenital malformations affecting that part of the masculine body.

The following example took place a few years after the complaint by the gentlemen of Valencia. The wife of the *converso* Guillem Sancho, a craftsman from Barcelona, gave birth to a child on 22 September 1437. It was her fifth child, but the previous four had all died, not even living long enough to be baptized. To avoid a repetition of this, under the threat of being accused of not baptizing their children, this family of *conversos* who were known to be such by everyone insisted on having the baby baptized without delay. The midwife who had been present at

<sup>6</sup> The letter from the Valencian representatives is dated 13 March 1413. It has been published in Agustí Rubio Vela, *Epistolari de la València medieval. II. 1412–1478* (Barcelona-Valencia: Institut interuniversitari-Abadia de Montserrat, 1998), p. 331.

the birth, who also came from a family of *conversos*, told the parish priest that the baby was a girl because she had not found any 'sign of balls nor of a member'. The baby was christened Eulalia. But after returning home and undressing the child, the midwife found 'a little piece of flesh on top like a fleece and on the head there was a little thing like a pine-kernel'. Faced with this uncertainty, the parents decided to call in the master in medicine Francesc de Gualbes (another *converso*), who declared that Eulalia was male. When the parish priest who had baptized her was consulted, he considered that it was necessary to repeat the ritual. However, a problem arose when the physician noted that the child's member lacked a prepuce; this provoked the indignation of the priest, who refused to carry out the baptism. However, the precarious state of health of the baby got the better of the priest's scruples, and he agreed to carry out the baptism *in extremis*, this time christening the child Nicolau. Nicolau, aka Eulalia, lived a further five days. Three days after the death of the baby, 'somebody' informed the Episcopal tribunal about the case (there was no Inquisition in Catalonia at this time), accusing the parents, midwife and physician, who were all *conversos*, of trying to hide the fact that they had circumcised Nicolau and involving the parish priest by pressurizing him to baptize the child. Guillem Sancho, the father, was imprisoned, and the priest and midwife were interrogated a few days later. On 3 January 1438, the judge ordered the exhumation of the body of Nicolau-Eulalia and its examination by two masters in medicine, Pere Pau and Gabriel García, who 'examined its genitals. And saw the evidence that on the membrum naturale there was a sort of small prepuce, that is, in the skin of the head of this member. It was a natural defect and had not been done by hand like an infant incompletely circumcised.' Guillem Sancho was released two days later.<sup>7</sup>

These births with 'natural circumcisions' or other atypical forms of the external masculine genitals occurred then, as now, in a very small percentage of cases. However, in a context like that, a single case was enough to bring about consequences which went far beyond those directly affected by that rare condition and which no doubt helped to strengthen the conviction, expressed for centuries in numerous Christian medical works, that many Jews were born already circumcised, as if it were a sort of acquired racial trait.<sup>8</sup> However, on the other hand, to

<sup>7</sup> The case was published, although accompanied by an interpretation that is not very satisfactory from our point of view, by Josep Hernando y Àngels Ibàñez, 'El procés contra el convers Nicolau Sanxo, ciutadà de Barcelona, acusat d'haver circumcidat el seu fill (1437-1438)', *Acta historica et archeologica Medievalia*, 13 (1992), pp. 75-100; here pp. 80-5.

<sup>8</sup> As Sander Gilman reminds us ('The indelibility of circumcision', *Koroth*, 9 (1991),

claim that it was a defect from birth was one way to try to remove the suspicion of the judges and inquisitors, especially if one could count on the complicity, or the readiness not to implicate themselves, of certain experts – physicians, surgeons or midwives – who were prepared to certify that this was the case in their technically objective opinion. Logically enough, it is very difficult to find explicit examples of those strategies, above all those that follow a tacit acceptance of a principle in some ways like 'don't ask, don't tell',<sup>9</sup> which does not alter the fact that some cases lead us to suspect its existence. Let us consider one of them.<sup>10</sup>

When the Inquisition was just commencing operations in Spain, Francisco Remírez, a *converso* who lived in Burbáguena, a town in the Kingdom of Aragon, was denounced to the tribunal as a *retaxado*. After being brought before the inquisitor, the defendant recounted a long story. Around 1424, soon after his birth, his parents went to a canon in Daroca to declare that they had two sons – Francisquico and Galacianico – and that they had both been born circumcised 'by nature'. Midwives, neighbours and relatives were summoned to make statements, and they all concurred in declaring that the two brothers had been born that way. At this, they summoned a notary who took down all these statements in writing. Soon afterwards, however, the parents of the two brothers were accused of being crypto-Jews and were imprisoned in the Aljafería, the prison of Zaragoza, where the boys were examined by various doctors, both Christians and Jews (it should be borne in mind that these events took place half a century before the expulsion of the Jews), who unanimously agreed that the circumcision was natural. This fact, as Francisco stated many years later to the inquisitor, was recorded in various documents bearing the royal seal to prevent the children from suffering any inconvenience when they grew up. The problem was that Francisco swore that he had lost those documents in which the physicians certified that the absence of a

pp. 806-17, here pp. 810-14), in the seventeenth century this idea appears to have been universally assumed and, from then on, there is a long history of descriptions of Jews born already circumcised by nature. Cf. too Otto Horch and Horst Denkler (eds), *Conditio Judaica: Judentum, Antisemitismus und deutschsprachige Literatur vom 18 Jahrhundert bis zum ersten Weltkrieg* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1988).

<sup>9</sup> As is known, this principle was formulated with regard to the attitude of the US Army on the existence of homosexuals within its ranks, but it can certainly be applied to similar situations in the past; see, for example, Karma Lochrie, 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell. Murderous Plots and Medieval Secrets', *GLS: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 1 (1995), pp. 405-17.

<sup>10</sup> The archival documents on this case were published by Encarnación Marín, 'Relación judeoconversa durante la segunda mitad del siglo XV en Aragón: nacimientos, hadas, circuncisiones', *Sefarad*, 41 (1981), pp. 273-300; here pp. 298-300.

prepuce on his member was by birth and was not the product of a ritual circumcision. As could be expected, the inquisitor ordered a re-examination, this time by a physician and a surgeon summoned by the Holy Office itself. Their opinion was completely opposed to what their colleagues had decided fifty years earlier: the suspicion, in their view, that Francisco had been circumcised was grounded.

There is evidence of other cases of similar allegations and where physicians and surgeons are called in. Sometimes the verdict is favourable to the *conversos* under suspicion, sometimes it is not. A few months before the decree on the expulsion of the Jews, Luis de Heredia, from Calatayud, another town in the Kingdom of Aragon, declared before the Inquisition that neither he nor his father nor his brothers had been circumcised, but that his brother Francisco 'had a defect in his member occasioned by a growth'. When the inquisitors ordered his examination, however, he was obliged to admit that he had been circumcised as a child and that the operation had been conducted by a Jewish physician. It is worth transcribing his account of how he found out about this at the age of eight or nine, when his mother told him the story:

Mother, the boys call me notched. What has been done to my member? [His mother replied:] Son, your grandfather Luis de Heredia brought some Jews to his house called master Juçe Toriel, physician, master Salamon Avayut, surgeon, and Huda Moreno, shoemaker; and said master Juçe Toriel, in the presence of said Jews and of your grandfather, circumcised you and drew a little blood from your member, gave you the name of Jaquobiquo and gave you four reales, and you were four or five years old when they circumcised you.<sup>11</sup>

Be that as it may, everything seems to indicate that these cases, which are strictly contemporary with the first years of inquisitorial activity and slightly prior to the moment of the expulsion, soon disappeared completely from the Spanish scene, though not from the Portuguese one, as we shall see below, because of the singular nature of the process of converting the Jews there. The implantation of the Inquisition in Castilia and Aragon between 1478 and 1482 and the decree to expel those Jews who were not prepared to be converted that was promulgated ten years later modified the way of life of the *conversos* in a profound way. The repressive efficacy of the Holy Office during the most terrible decades of its activity, the loss of the groups of Jews with the strongest religious convictions through the expulsion, and the fear and desire to survive of those who decided to stay, appear to have led to the progressive

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 293–4.

disappearance of these practices of clandestine circumcision. Although many families of *conversos* maintained other practices that were less risky, to mark the masculine body with a sign that was so easily identifiable and which had attracted the accusation of 'falseness' by the old Christians in the previous century seemed too absurd. On the other hand, as the Hebraic sources show, some rabbis in the Sephardic diaspora were understanding towards the abandonment of this perilous rite. Some, like Rabbi Joseph Moses Trani in his *Responsa*, went so far as to criticize those who, through having clandestinely circumcised their sons in enemy territory, risked their lives and those of their families.<sup>12</sup> The Jews of Sepharad had thus acquired the invisibility necessary for survival in their own country.

In this respect, the biblical tradition itself offered food for thought concerning the decision on whether to abandon the practice of circumcision or not, both for the Jews who had decided to stay on in Spain after the decree of expulsion of 1492 and to embrace Christianity publicly, and for their Portuguese counterparts who were obliged to become converts in 1497 without the option of exile. It should be remembered that the people of Israel abandoned the practice of circumcision during the exodus from Egypt – they were considered impure as a result. Upon arrival in the promised land, they all underwent the rite of circumcision.<sup>13</sup> No doubt the parallel between this situation and the submission of the Marranos to Christianity was used in all of the rabbinical – and non-rabbinical – discussion of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of non-circumcision in hostile territory.<sup>14</sup>

On the one hand, the vast majority of the *anussim* – those who continued to practice their Judaism in clandestinity – abandoned circumcision, at least in sixteenth-century Spain. The terrible repression unleashed in the first years of the Inquisition systematically attacked the practice of clandestine circumcision, which had been maintained at first

<sup>12</sup> Cited by Yosef Kaplan, *From Christianity to Judaism. The Story of Isaac Orobio de Castro* (New York: Published for the Littman Library by Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 335–6.

<sup>13</sup> As Émile Junes reminds us, 'Étude sur la circoncision rituelle en Israël', *Revue d'Histoire de la Médecine Hébraïque*, 6 (1953), 16: pp. 37–56; here p. 56, citing *Joshua* 5:2–9, at the beginning of the fortieth year after the exodus from Egypt, the children of Israel, led by Joshua, who had succeeded Moses, crossed the Jordan and entered the Promised Land. At their first camp in Gilgal, Joshua circumcised them all with stone knives at the Hill of the Foreskins to renew the pact with Yahweh, which had been broken during the years of wandering in the desert when they had failed to circumcise the newborn.

<sup>14</sup> Yosef Kaplan, 'Wayward New Christians and Stubborn New Jews: the Shaping of a Jewish Identity', *Jewish History*, 8 (1994), pp. 27–41.

and was still often practised at a later age on adult males or even on old men, as can be seen from the records of the trials in Ciudad Real in 1484 and after.<sup>15</sup> Anti-Semitic Spanish tracts of the period, well represented by Alonso de Espina's *Fortalitium fidei*, assigned a crucial place to denouncing the clandestine practice of circumcision and the obsessive denunciation of the incompatibility between circumcision and Christianity clearly highlighted the priority of eradicating the practice at any price.<sup>16</sup> This is the era of the process of typification of the crypto-Jewish practices by the Christian authorities aimed at their severe repression; the Hispano-Christian idea that circumcision is the baptism of the Jews no doubt stems from this; the obsession with this recognizable 'body sign' therefore emerges at the same time as the birth of the *converso* as such. The Christian theologians and canonists were not slow to find precedents for their project, falling back on a reinvented legal tradition. For instance, they had recourse to the medieval compilation of laws *Fuero Juzgo* which condemned to death a Christian who had circumcised his son.<sup>17</sup> The *retaxados*, the 'Jews with the sign' (*judíos de señal*) – terms which appear in the charges and in the trials of *conversos* in Castilia at the end of the fifteenth century – must have realized that their days were numbered.

However, ritual circumcision continued to form a firmly rooted part of general collective representations, both among the old Christians, who were continually encouraged to remember how to distinguish a crypto-Jew hiding in their midst, and among the new Christians; whether they were voluntary or forced converts, because for some of them the presence of the prepuce was a serious offence to the faith of their ancestors which they now had to keep buried (and gradually impoverished), and because for all of them any genital problem involving the loss of skin, flesh or any other visible damage was a danger. Physicians and surgeons knew the complaints or damage that could arise from the removal of the prepuce for medical reasons, as well as the thousand ways in which the simulation of this damage could be adopted. They therefore continued to be essential, and it was not necessary to wait until being hauled before the inquisitorial court before submitting to their examination. This special position gave them a determinate social power and, whether as accomplices of the inquisitors or as allies of their patients, they knew how to use the situation to their own advantage.

<sup>15</sup> See *Records of the trials of the Spanish Inquisition in Ciudad Real*, ed. with intro. and notes by Haim Beinart, Jerusalem, Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1977.

<sup>16</sup> Haim Beinart, *Los conversos*, p. 22.

<sup>17</sup> *Fuero Juzgo*, XII, II, 17.

This situation explains the appearance, at least as early as the first years of the sixteenth century, of a type of notarial document that makes us realize to what extent it was necessary to maintain an attitude of preventive defence towards a practice – clandestine circumcision – which actually seems to have been abandoned.<sup>18</sup> Anyone affected by any lesion or infirmity which entailed surgical treatment of his male member did not hesitate to summon physicians, surgeons, neighbours and relatives around his bed to act as witnesses, before a notary, of the intervention he was about to undergo so that all would certify with their signature that the intervention was carried out for medical reasons and no others. This document was to be converted into a passport to freedom from suspicion, if it was not lost, as poor Francisco Remírez claimed had happened to his. Above all, however, that operation carried out in the home in the view of all, especially of the neighbourhood, was in itself a passport of fundamental orthodoxy. We thus find ourselves faced with a situation which may seem paradoxical. In theory, ritual circumcision among the Spanish crypto-Jews had disappeared, and the juridical role that physicians and surgeons had played in earlier generations should have lost its meaning. On the contrary, the maintenance of an 'imaginary circumcision' not only prevented them from losing their importance, but it also provided them with an even greater power to intervene, even independently of their possible juridical interventions.

#### Circumcision in the surgical treatises of the sixteenth century

With their surgical interventions carried out in full view of the public, with their opinion endowed with notarial truth in the protocols or declarations before the legal authorities, physicians and surgeons could guarantee that a circumcision had been carried out for therapeutic reasons or that a determinate appearance of a male member had been caused by a congenital disorder or by a pathological process, and not by a ritual intervention. They were therefore able to provide a passport to the invisibility of the *converso*, just as they could lead to his

<sup>18</sup> We know of various examples of this type of notarial document, published in two works which, however, fail to grasp their historical significance properly: Gustavo García Herrera, 'La más antigua noticia escrita sobre un acto quirúrgico en la ciudad de Málaga', in *Actas del I Congreso de Historia de la Medicina Española* (Madrid-Toledo: Sociedad Española de Historia de la Medicina, 1963), pp. 387–93; and José Gómez-Menor, 'Dos casos de circuncisión terapéutica y otros datos sobre médicos toledanos de los siglos XVI y XVII', *Cuadernos de Historia de la Medicina Española*, 14 (1975), pp. 191–207.

condemnation. On the other hand, the technical expertise of the surgeons (at the time physicians were hardly ever accustomed to personally handling the body of an ill person) could even facilitate the simulation of a 'normal' masculine body if occasion provided. Since the time of Celsus, in the Roman era, surgical techniques were known for re-implanting the prepuce or for simulating it.<sup>19</sup> Even the New Testament echoes this practice, as can be seen in some of the Pauline epistles to the converted communities of the Hellenic world in contact with clusters of Jews.<sup>20</sup> A lot had changed since those early days of Christianity, but their descendants in the Iberian peninsula continued to have problems with prepuces, whether their own or other people's, even after they had been freed from the presence of the Jews in the legal sense.

Given the peculiar position of the surgeons in this matter, it is hardly surprising that the surgical literature of the day contains explanations of all types of problems affecting the prepuce, sometimes with a level of sophistication far above that of similar treatises written in other settings where the 'problem' of the *converso* did not arise, in spite of the fact that they all set out from the same tradition. This is not to say that we find explicit references to the question, which would have been unthinkable in printed surgical literature, subjected to the usual restrictions and which generally circulated in the vernacular and not in Latin, thereby making it accessible to a wider reading public. The general treatises on surgery, the most extensive type of surgical literature, started out from a group of late medieval texts, and although they copied their structure and content, they introduced certain novelties. On the question of circumcision, what had been determined as the essential content by the late medieval transmission was expounded clearly and succinctly by Guy de Chauliac, the fourteenth-century Occitanian surgeon who wrote the most successful surgical manual, translated into numerous languages and which retained its success for a long time after the introduction of printing:

According to the law of the Jews, Muslims and others, circumcision is very beneficial provided it is done properly. The glans penis is held by the root and, once it has been aroused, the prepuce is stretched as much as possible with the nails, taking care not to cut the glans. Once the skin has been cut off, the bleeding is staunched

<sup>19</sup> Aulus Cornelius Celsus, who flourished in the middle of the first century AD, wrote *De Medicina Libri Octo*; the whole of §25 of book VII is dedicated to the description of the two commonest kinds of simulation: the manual stretching of the skin covering the shaft until it covers the glans again; or the grafting of a piece of skin from the pubis.

<sup>20</sup> For example, in 1 Corinthians 7:18: 'Is any man called being circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised. Is any called in uncircumcision? Let him not be circumcised.'

with a red powder, or it is cauterized, and it heals like any other wound.<sup>21</sup>

But surgery developed considerably during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and even though the manuals and treatises remained strongly rooted in the Galenic tradition, their content was expanding. We can see how the brief chapter that Guy de Chauliac dedicated to the operation of removing the prepuce grew longer in several Spanish manuals, and the cure recommended in this case became involved in one of the key debates of Renaissance surgery: the use of cauterization to cicatrize certain wounds. The Spanish university surgeons Bartolomé Hidalgo de Agüero and Juan Frago, two of the most outstanding representatives of the new Spanish surgery of the sixteenth century, represented the two positions in this debate. Both treatises contained a chapter describing the operation of circumcision, for therapeutic reasons of course, but they both mention ritual circumcision in passing.

The Sevillian Hidalgo de Agüero published his *Avisos particulares de syrurgia contra la comun opinión* in 1584. This work was a compilation of various maxims on the new surgical methods, including the twentieth which declared that there was no need to cauterize 'any prepuce that is cut off'. Two years after the publication of this work, the Complutensian Juan Frago responded harshly in the second edition of his *Chirurgia universal* to Hidalgo's recommendations. With regard to the twentieth, his response was: 'to teach that there is no need to cauterize a prepuce that is cut off, even though it is mortified, is so contrary to reason that I cannot imagine on what it is based'. Hidalgo replied to this criticism in the 1604 edition of his treasury of true surgery (*Thesoro de verdadera Cirugia*):

... we declare that the cure should be carried out without it [cauterization] because it is a horrible and ghastly ultimate remedy ... and because the scab, if it is removed, usually takes a lot of flesh with it ... It is thus possible to cure a diseased prepuce without cauterization. Although it was a precept of Galen, use and experience have now taught us a different doctrine.<sup>22</sup>

Though marginal to the specific dispute on the use of cauterization and the excellent defence of experience against the criterium of authority,

<sup>21</sup> We cite from the earliest printed edition known to us: Guy de Chauliac, *Inventari o collectori en la part cirurgical de medicina* (Barcelona: Pere Miquel Librater, 1492), p. 248.

<sup>22</sup> Edition consulted: Bartolomé Hidalgo de Agüero, *Thesoro de la verdadera Cirugia y via particular contra la comiun opinión, con la qual se hace un perfecto cirujano* (Barcelona: Sebastián de Cormellas, 1624); the first edition is: *Thesoro de la verdadera Cirugia* (Sevilla: en casa de Francisco Pérez, 1604), which reproduced Frago's criticisms and Hidalgo's replies to them.

which could have made Hidalgo de Agüero a leading figure in the so-called scientific revolution if he had concentrated on stars instead of prepuces, both surgeons mentioned ritual circumcision. Hidalgo confined his remarks to a succinct version of the text of Chauliac cited above: 'that part [the male member] also has a skin covering its head, which is called the prepuce or foreskin. This is what the Hebrews cut off in accordance with their law. It serves to cover the gland or head and enhances the pleasure of the sexual act.'<sup>23</sup>

The claim that the prepuce 'enhances the pleasure of the sexual act' is apparently new. The Sevillian surgeon leaves it at that, but his opponent and colleague Juan Fragoso has more to say:

The head of this member is called the prepuce or foreskin and it is the skin that the Hebrews remove when they circumcise. Its principal use was to enhance the pleasure of the women: for this reason Jewish, Turkish and Moorish women are more subjected to the Christian slaves than to the men of their own nation ... The circumcision of this part, which involves cutting off all the prepuce, has two purposes: one is for the observance and compliance or ceremony of the law, as was done in the past and as the Moors still do; the other is as a remedy for any disease or mortification. I am not concerned with those who practise circumcision in conformity with the religion and customs of certain peoples, but with those whose prepuce grows black and putrefied.<sup>24</sup>

The simple mention of 'sexual pleasure' becomes much more in Fragoso's text. Although he stated that it was not his intention to discuss ritual circumcision, in passing, as someone who disapproves of the practice, he had already echoed a commonplace of Christian anti-Semitic propaganda, thereby conferring on it a 'scientific' legitimation from being reflected in a treatise of this type: the statement on the capacity of the Christians to please women sexually precisely by means of that piece of skin that 'the others' (Jews, Moors and Turks, in this case) did not have; and in passing, took for granted the marital infidelity of Jewish, Moorish and Turkish women, who found with Christian slaves the pleasure that their husbands were incapable of procuring for them. As far as we have been able to reconstruct it, Fragoso's reference comes from Gabriele Falloppia, the famous professor of anatomy and surgery in the university of Padua, the brilliant successor to Vesalius.

<sup>23</sup> Bartolomé Hidalgo de Agüero, *Thesoro de la verdadera Cirugia* (Barcelona: Sebastián de Cormellas, 1624): VII, 18, p. 426; in the antidotary that accompanied the work, Hidalgo provided a prescription of 'water to relax the retracted and swollen prepuce', *ibid.*, p. 284.

<sup>24</sup> Edition consulted: Juan Fragoso, *Chirurgia universal* (Alcalá: en casa de Juan Gracián, 1607); the citation is from I, 17, p. 18.

Falloppia's treatise *De decoratione*, published for the first time in 1560, includes a chapter on 'the correction of a short prepuce' and the consideration of the precept of circumcision as a divine command to the Jews to prevent them from being distracted by the pleasures of the flesh and to make them serve their God better.<sup>25</sup> Few scholars have devoted any attention to this commonplace. One of those who has, Winfried Schleiner, is more concerned to consider to what extent Falloppia tries to respond to the divine precept of circumcision by two options: the reduction of sexual pleasure that circumcision is supposed to entail, or the reduction of the risk of contracting infections like the *lues gallica*, as the Paduan called it.<sup>26</sup> Schleiner thus fails to comment on the other part of the Falloppian passage referring to the pleasure that women derive from the prepuce and the consequences that this entails for the relations of 'infidel' women with their husbands and with Christian slaves. It is precisely this aspect that attracts the attention of Fragoso who, curiously, does not pay any attention to the first part of Falloppia's comments. Be that as it may, it should be emphasized that the surgical literature offered a prestigious support to these kinds of ideas which thereby acquired scientific legitimacy. Of course, this is not the only case in which medical discourse served to legitimize representations of the 'other' based on alleged physical inferiority that was taken to be evident and beyond discussion. It is worth recalling here that, without leaving the explanatory framework of Galen, for many centuries Christian physicians offered a scientifically impeccable explanation of the 'fact' (which they did not call into doubt) that many Jewish males menstruated.<sup>27</sup> But we must return to our prepuces.

<sup>25</sup> Specifically on this aspect see Thomas W. Laqueur, 'Amor Veneris vel Dulcedo Appetetur', in *Fragments for a history of the human body*, Michel Feher (ed.) (New York: Zone, 1989), vol. 3, pp. 91–131, here p. 115 n. 80, where he cites from the *De decoratione* although he attributes it to 'someone writing in Fallopius's name'; other scholars, such as Schleiner, follow later editions of Falloppia, but the original can be dated without question to 1560, which explains the reference to Fragoso. We have consulted: Gabrielle Falloppio, *Opera genuina omnia* (Venetiis: Apud Io. Antonium & Iacobum de Franciscis, 1606), which includes 'De decoratione' in vol. III and chap. IX; the passages in question appear on pp. 119 ff.

<sup>26</sup> Winfried Schleiner, *Medical Ethics in the Renaissance* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1995), p. 137 with nn. 73–4, and pp. 340–41.

<sup>27</sup> During the preparation of this chapter, a short work appeared by John L. Beusterien, 'Jewish Male Menstruation in XVIIth century Spain', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 73 (1999), pp. 447–56; unfortunately, the author is badly informed on the interpretative framework of Galenist medicine, which gave rational coherence to such a belief, and on his own sources, which he handles essentially through George Mariscal, *Contradictory Subjects: Quevedo, Cervantes and Seventeenth Century Spanish Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 42–5. The reader interested in this subject should read Beusterien's article with extreme caution or consult the work of Mariscal

No matter how brief or indirect it might be, the explanation of the mechanism of circumcision, the mention of the existence of ritual circumcision, including the classical forms of simulating the prepuce, maintained their presence in the text. And every reader could absorb it in his own way, since it is a well-known fact that not everyone reads the same text in the same way. What interests us here, at any rate, is to point out how circumcision had not disappeared from the surgical manuals nor from the collective imagination of inquisitors and old Christians; nor, of course, from that of the new Christians, who were patently reminded of their 'marked' origin by the outbursts of social tension that were periodically revived by the persecutions and the persistence of the statutes of purity of blood in a great many Iberian institutions.<sup>28</sup>

#### Clandestine circumcision and circumcision in the diaspora: the reality of the practice in the seventeenth century

The problem, however, was not just one of survival in the imagination; it was not just a question of physicians' and inquisitors' stories. There was something more, since there is documentary evidence that the practice of ritual circumcision had not disappeared completely from the peninsular scene, no matter how much the first generations of the Spanish *conversos* had abandoned it after the expulsion from a simple desire to stay alive.

There is a double explanation for the fact that new cases of circumcised males can be found in the territory of the Iberian peninsula from the beginning of the seventeenth century to the first decades of the eighteenth. On the one hand, one should bear in mind the different situation of the Portuguese *conversos*, which led to the existence in the Portuguese kingdom of clusters of crypto-Jews who were much less inclined to integration; moreover, during the period of dynastic union of all the peninsular kingdoms (1580–1640), there was a massive exodus of Portuguese *conversos* to Castilia, both for economic motives and to

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directly. The interesting study by Sander Gilman, *The Case of Sigmund Freud: Race and Identity at the Turn of the Century* (Baltimore, 1993), is still the best treatment of the subject to date, although he does not specifically tackle the context of the Iberian peninsula.

<sup>28</sup> The so-called statutes of purity of blood became generalized in the course of the sixteenth century in various civil and religious institutions of the Spanish monarchy, including universities and religious congregations; they were used to exclude persons who were unable to produce a genealogy of pure Old Christian blood. The best study of the question is still Albert Sicroff, *Les controverses des statuts de 'pureté de sang' en Espagne du XVe au XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Marcel Didier, 1979).

escape the Portuguese Inquisition which, paradoxically, was harsher than its Spanish counterpart in repressing clusters of crypto-Jews during that period. On the other hand, ever since the beginning of the seventeenth century, the creation of communities of Sephardic Jews in the south of France, in some Italian territories (mainly in Venice and Livorno, the main gateway to the Grand Duchy of Tuscany), in several German cities (principally Hamburg) and above all in Amsterdam implied a communication route with the clusters of crypto-Jews south of the Pyrenees and, for many of their members, an attractive temptation to start a new life as Jews, far from the clutches of their persecutors.

These two factors led to cases of clandestine circumcision among Portuguese *conversos* in different parts of the peninsula, on the one hand, and cases of people who fled to the Jewish communities in northern Europe, on the other, where they were confronted with having to decide whether to circumcise themselves and their sons. To make matters even more complicated, some of these circumcised Jews in Burdeos, Hamburg or Amsterdam returned to Iberian territory and sometimes had the ill fortune to fall into the hands of the inquisitors. The latter found themselves once again faced with the evidence of the *retaxado*, his attempts to attribute his condition to medical problems or congenital malformations, and with the necessity of having recourse to physicians and surgeons to decide whether or not ritual circumcision had taken place. It is therefore understandable that, at least from 1635, if not before, the *Suprema*, the central council which controlled the Holy Office from Madrid, ordered all the tribunals of the Inquisition to have the physicians and surgeons who worked for them to conduct a systematic examination of all those accused of Judaism to establish whether or not they had been circumcised.<sup>29</sup> It is these expert reports provided for the inquisitors by the physicians and surgeons that constitute the most direct evidence for the existence of what, even if only for a minority, was still a persistent phenomenon. Only three cases will be discussed here: one of a clandestine circumcision in the peninsula, another of a circumcision carried out on a male adult in exile, and one of the many cases in which it is impossible for us to decide whether it was a matter of ritual or medical circumcision. They have been chosen because they are very illustrative of similar other cases and because their protagonists, besides being relevant figures in the history of European Judaism or Spanish medicine and science from the generations in ascendancy between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, were also physicians. This presents us with the figure of the physician on one side

<sup>29</sup> This instruction was repeated in the same terms in 1662; we have found a manuscript copy of them both in Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid, Ms. 854, p. 60.

and the inquisitorial scene on the other: as expert witness and, in the dock, as victim.<sup>30</sup>

The first case is that of Isaac Orobio de Castro, an important philosopher and polemical Jewish thinker, who died in Amsterdam in 1687. He was born some seventy years earlier in Bragança, in the north of Portugal, had been christened with the name of Baltasar Alvares de Orobio, and had been forced to flee to Castilia when he was still very young with his whole family, which had seen how the Portuguese Inquisition was trying and condemning many of its members on charges of crypto-Judaism. Around 1640 we find him in Málaga. By now Baltasar is a young doctor who writes and publishes a text on the plague epidemic which had attacked this Andalusian city where he exercised his profession. But a few years later, someone denounced him to the Inquisition and in 1654 he was taken prisoner and taken to the inquisitorial prison of Seville, in the district of Triana on the banks of the Guadalquivir, whereupon the inquisitors did not hesitate to have him examined by the physicians and surgeon of the tribunal on 9 September 1654:

An inspection was carried out by the physicians and surgeon of this Holy Office, who gave evidence on oath that at the tip of the prepuce on the lower right and on the outside there was a scar with clear loss of tissue, and on the lower part outside at the root of the frenulum of the same male member there was another scar with loss of tissue, and on the head of the glans on the right there was another longitudinal scar in the surface of the tissue of the member, so that, in their solid opinion concerning a person so suspicious, it is the Judaic rite of circumcision.<sup>31</sup>

In spite of this judicial evidence, Baltasar Alvares escaped capital punishment by claiming that his parents had subjected him to the rite soon after birth and by demonstrating his willingness to have been and to be a good Christian. However, he was sentenced to several penances and to long imprisonment, but soon afterwards he took advantage of the lack of vigilance of the inquisitors in Seville to flee the city. He managed to reach the south of France, and not long afterwards settled in Amsterdam under the name of Isaac Orobio de Castro.<sup>32</sup>

Other Portuguese *conversos* (no doubt most of them) did not dare to

<sup>30</sup> For a more detailed treatment of this theme see José Pardo Tomás and Alvar Martínez Vidal, 'Victims and Experts: Medical Practitioners and the Spanish Inquisition', in *Coping with Sickness: Medicine, Law and Human Rights*, John Woodward and Robert Jütte (eds) (Sheffield: EAHMH Publications, 2000), pp. 11–28.

<sup>31</sup> Archivo Histórico Nacional (Madrid), Inquisición, leg. 2987, f. 2r.

<sup>32</sup> The best personal and intellectual biography of Orobio de Castro is that by Yosef Kaplan, *From Christianity to Judaism*.

circumcise their sons in clandestinity and so, when the majority chose the path of exile in order to profess their Jewish faith freely, they had to face up to adult circumcision. We have found many cases in Amsterdam, Hamburg, Toulouse or Livorno, but will confine ourselves here to a single one, once again chosen because of the importance of the subject in the history of European Judaism in the seventeenth century and because he was a physician.

Isaac Cardoso was a Jewish physician established in Verona in the Serenissima Republica of Venice. He was born in Beira in Portugal (one of the regions with the largest number of clusters of *conversos*) and grew up in Castilia in the early years of the seventeenth century under the name of Fernando Cardoso. He achieved a certain reputation there as physician and as a poet at the court of Philip IV. When the Spanish political situation changed around 1640 and the omnipotent minister Olivares, the most important protector of the Portuguese families of *conversos*, fell from power, Cardoso decided to leave the country and to set out for the Veneto to live there as a Jew. He adopted the name of Isaac and wrote various works on medicine and natural philosophy. No doubt, however, he owes his importance within the world of Judaism to the fact that in 1671 he published *Las excelencias de los Hebreos* in Amsterdam in his native tongue. The fifth of these excellences contains one of the most enthusiastic panegyrics of circumcision. But, in the middle of Cardoso's evocation of the spiritual pact between the Jews and Yahweh symbolized by circumcision, we find a description of the pain it involves, which, we may conjecture, is connected with the personal experience of circumcision carried out on an adult:

... because it is not a light wound in the leg, or an easy cauterization in the arm, but a difficult and painful affair, and no one would decide to undergo it unless he were moved by great zeal and the knowledge that he was embracing the law of the Lord; and that is why it is carried out at the tender age of eight days, because the pain is less, which increases with age, when a man is seized by fear and anticipates things before they occur.<sup>33</sup>

The third case to be mentioned here has another physician as its protagonist. Born in Murcia from a family of Portuguese *conversos*, he did not choose to go into exile in order to profess the faith of his ancestors, but, after undergoing an inquisitorial trial at two different periods in his life, he opted for assimilation within the Christian society that he saw emerging:

<sup>33</sup> Isaac Cardoso, *Excelencias de los hebreos* (Venice, 1679), p. 349. Cited by Yosef Hayin Yerushalmi, *From Spanish court to Italian ghetto*, p. 202.

His name is Diego López Zapata, he is a physician, and the best student in Madrid, and the other physicians dislike him because of his arrogance. He is a Portuguese Jew and I would like you to hear him talking about the law of Moses, because he speaks well and is an intelligent and practical man. He browbeats us into going to the physicians for us to declare that he is potent and able to marry, in spite of his not having a male member, because it has been cut. He bases his argument on this text of Galen: *homo sine membro generare potest*. And he added that said Diego is small in stature, quite sturdily built, dark-skinned, with a light coloured face, black eyes, a big nose and mouth, wavy brown short hair, slightly hunchbacked, aged about thirty.<sup>34</sup>

In the course of various interrogation sessions in September and October 1691, Francisco Gabriel Valenzuela, a twenty-year-old held captive in the prison of the Inquisition of Logroño, was hurling this and other accusations against the doctor Diego Mateo Zapata (1664–1745), who was detained in Madrid on 6 December 1691 on the charge of being a crypto-Jew. Valenzuela stated that he had been a student 'of grammar and art' and had helped his uncle Tomás as a confectioner. His parents, he believed, had had some problems with the Inquisition in Naples and Rome 'for superstitious or Jewish matters', but 'they got off without a sentence'. He had been in Livorno, Genoa, Marseille and other parts of France and had had dealings 'with Moorish and Jewish heretics', but 'only in connection with his business'. Valenzuela declared that he had known Zapata in Madrid, about eighteen months earlier (that is, around March 1690), in the house of another physician of Portuguese origin, Doctor Arias Silveira, from whom he had heard about the state of Zapata's genitals and his attempts to obtain a certificate from his medical colleagues testifying to his ability to procreate.

Soon after being detained in Madrid, Zapata was transferred to the prison of Cuenca, a small town with its own tribunal of the Holy Office. As soon as he had entered the prison on 21 January 1692, Zapata was examined by Joseph de Torralva, a physician, and by Gerónimo Andrés, a surgeon, both connected with the Holy Office, who issued the following statement: 'The prisoner has been circumcised, but it may be for medical reasons, as he has many scars and has lost a lot of the flesh of the member, more than the ritual requires.'<sup>35</sup>

A year later Zapata left prison leaving the case suspended because they could not find enough evidence to continue pressing charges.

For almost thirty years, the life of Diego Mateo Zapata passed in an apparently normal way, and the activity of the physician in the circles of

<sup>34</sup> Archivo Diocesano, Cuenca [hereafter ADC], Inquisición, exp. 6955 ff. 3v–4r.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 29r.

the court in Madrid earned him a very high reputation due to the role that he played in various scientific debates connected with the introduction of the supposed theoretical foundations of modern medicine at the time. In various publications Zapata defended the use of quinine, the demonstration of the circulation of the blood, with all the physiological consequences it entailed, the anti-Galenic theoretical justification of the use of chemical medicaments such as medicines containing antimony, and the corpuscular theories of Cartesians and Gassendians against the furious attacks that the most traditionalist Aristotelians kept publishing, both in Spain and elsewhere in Europe. What is more, Zapata was the main protagonist in the foundation of what can be considered as the first modern scientific institution in Spain at the time, the Royal Society of Medicine and Other Sciences in Seville, of which he was a founder member in 1699 and became president a few years later.

Although his *converso* background, the inquisitorial trials of his parents and relatives as well as his own trial barred his entry to the privileged position of the royal physicians, his reputation among the progressive groups, his intellectual energy, and his unquestionable skill as a practising physician acquired him a considerable reputation, which enabled him to benefit from a dense network of patients from the court hierarchs and aristocrats and to reach the position of house physician of the Duke of Medinaceli, one of the most prominent members of the Castilian nobility of his day.<sup>36</sup>

His reputation and contacts, however, did not stop an inquisitorial commissary from appearing on his doorstep in Madrid at dawn on 1 March 1721 with a prison order against Zapata and another for the confiscation of all of his property. New accusations had been levelled against him which agreed in labelling him as a conspicuous crypto-Jew, a member of a Jewish community in Madrid, which was supposed to be well organized, and to have been active in it for more than a decade.

<sup>36</sup> The basic references on the figure of Zapata and the so-called *novator* movement are still the classic study by Vicente Peset, 'El doctor Zapata (1664–1745) y la renovación de la medicina en España', *Archivo Iberoamericano de Historia de la Medicina*, 12 (1960), pp. 35–93; and the equally classic chapter by José María López Piñero in his *Ciencia y técnica en la sociedad española de los siglos XVI y XVII* (Barcelona: Labor, 1979), pp. 403–33. More recently, we have tried to contribute some new documentary evidence and interpretations in a number of articles co-authored with Àlvar Martínez Vidal: 'In tenebris adhuc versantes. La respuesta de los novatores españoles a la invectiva de Pierre Régis', *Dynamis*, 15 (1995), pp. 301–20; 'El Tribunal del Protomedicato y los médicos reales (1665–1724): entre la gracia real y la carrera profesional', *Dynamis*, 16 (1996), pp. 59–89; 'Los orígenes del teatro anatómico de Madrid (1689–1728)', *Asclepio*, 49 (1997), pp. 5–38.

This time the evidence was apparently stronger and better founded. Zapata's trial dragged on for more than three years, during which he remained incommunicado in prison and was subjected to interrogations which, following the sophisticated judicial technique of the Holy Office, attempted not only to get him to denounce himself, but also to obtain evidence to accuse other alleged accomplices and co-religionists. When the results of all these interrogations proved to be meagre, Zapata was tortured. On the rack he confessed many things under torture. Although he admitted having been initiated into the faith of Moses by his mother, Clara Mercado, who had been tried and condemned by the Inquisition of Murcia and had been imprisoned for several years in the prisons of the Inquisition while her son Diego was still a child, he never admitted having been circumcised for religious reasons. At the end of each of the torture sessions, the physician and surgeon of the tribunal examined the prisoner to inspect the seriousness of his wounds on the rack and to decide whether or not the torture should continue. Once the inquisitor had put a stop to the torture, when Zapata was asked to ratify his confession he retracted it, claiming that his admission of guilt had been dictated solely from fear of torture. Finally, in January 1725, the inquisitors pronounced sentence and sentenced him to abjure his errors for being 'highly suspect' of having followed the law of Moses, to be imprisoned perpetually with penances, to be exiled far from the court for ten years, to wear a penitent's gown, and to receive two hundred lashes at an *auto-da-fé*. The application of this corporal punishment required a fresh expert examination by the physician and the surgeon who were at the service of the tribunal at the time. The physician, Agustín Aragonés, and the surgeon, friar Lorenzo Navarro, declared: 'he completely lacks the testicles and scrotum and most of the male member because of an illness that he suffered in childhood, but ... there is no impediment to any physical work, even heavy work'.<sup>37</sup>

A lot can be said about the different facets of the life of this person, above all since we have at our disposal a large number of unpublished documents from the complete transcription of his two inquisitorial trials. Our objective here, though, is to take the continuous references to the state of Zapata's genitals as a case in which the consequences of a probable clandestine practice of circumcision, carried out in very precarious conditions, could occasionally involve additional problems such as castration. In fact, as the case of Zapata shows, the existence of castration was more than a fantasy in the minds and bodies of some men in the Iberian peninsula, both those who underwent clandestine

<sup>37</sup> ADC, exp. 7065, f. 320r.

circumcision resulting in complications, whether due to the lack of skill of a bungling surgeon or to a mistake on the part of a skilled one, and those who postponed the moment of intervention until they found themselves in exile, as we have seen in the case of Cardoso.

Moreover, the events described above all enable us to see clearly how, time and again in the course of the development of an inquisitorial trial, the expert advice of the physician and surgeon become an essential part of that very trial. Time and again the body of the victim is scrutinized by these court officers who deliver their verdict to the inquisitorial judge. The suspicion of circumcision is present from the start of the trial; the deliberate ambiguity of the experts allows the maintenance of the 'burden of proof' on the defendant and it only disappears (at least in the judicial rhetoric of the judgement) when sentence has been passed and the defendant has been condemned. It is necessary to stress that it is only then that it is unambiguously stated that the victim's genitals are in the state they are 'because of an illness that he suffered in childhood'. In fact, we find ourselves confronting another aspect, although one that has not received much attention, of an interesting problem of interpretation with behind it a long (and probably interminable) hermeneutic debate on the value of the inquisitorial sources as evidence for the crypto-Judaic practices of the Portuguese and Spanish Marranos. What should be made clear is that, in the final instance, it makes little difference whether or not Zapata's injuries really were the consequence of complications resulting from a clandestine circumcision. What is important is that, in this case and in others, this is what many people believed, and the judgement of a physician and a surgeon of the Inquisition was deliberately equivocal as long as the trial continued; only after sentence had been passed condemning him as a crypto-Jew did it become possible to admit explicitly the possibility that the lesions might have had some other cause. And, in spite of the theoretically iron secrecy of the Inquisition, this ended up becoming public knowledge, which enabled the fact to be put to a variety of uses, even though it is unlikely that it would have won approval. Let us consider an example of what happened to the same Zapata.

The literature generated by the scientific and medical debates of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries in Spain and in the neighbouring countries (though not always at the same tempo) occasionally reveals a rhetoric that is very remote from the current standards of scientific language which, though we often forget it, are relatively recent. The licentiate Luis Espinardo, a physician, published a text entitled *La nueva medicina triunfante* at the beginning of 1691, only a few months before Zapata's first detention. It begins by telling the

reader how a work by Zapata published the year before in Madrid under the title of *Verdadera apología en defensa de la medicina racional* had come into his hands, and goes on:

Knowing that, since he [Zapata] was castrated, was supposed to have come to court to devote himself to music rather than to medicine, I purchased the book ... And seeing the shameless way he speaks, the author (I said to myself) resembles the race and it could be said to his face (if the barefaced have one) what Seneca said: *qualis vir, talis oratio* (everyone always speaks as he is) ... This capon would have been better employed in directing his satires against the person who bungled his circumcision.<sup>38</sup>

Contrary to what may appear at first sight, neither the tone nor the content stand out for their singularity. We are too used to seeing the scientific controversies of the seventeenth century treated as a pure history of ideas embodied in equally ideal texts. Then, as today, scientific controversy was plunged into a determinate context and directed by a conjuncture of interests more complex than mere 'scientific reason'; the language, rhetorical and stylistic tricks were a part of that conjuncture. In the case that concerns us here, the aggressiveness of Zapata's opponent, which included insults and accusations like the ones we have reproduced here, was not an isolated case. On the contrary, other writers repeated them in subsequent years, while Zapata (a relentless polemicist, in spite of everything, who demonstrated a tenacity worthier of Sisyphus than of a court physician) kept going into print to disseminate his opinions and theories.<sup>39</sup>

#### The circumcision of the new Jews: history and memory from outside the Sepharad

As we have seen in the case of Isaac Cardoso, it is not by chance that the most enthusiastic defenders of circumcision and the most heterodox of its critics (including Benito Espinosa, better known as Baruch Spinoza) were 'new Jews' who had arrived in the communities in northern Europe from Sepharad, where they, their parents or grandparents, had lived as Christians and among Christians, had received a Christian education, and had been obliged to practice the Christian religion. Present-day historians of these north European Sephardic communities, among

<sup>38</sup> Luis Espinardo, *La nueva medicina triunfante y venida del segundo Mesías en la real y verdadera Circulación de la Sangre* (Valencia, s. l. 1691); pp. 1-2.

<sup>39</sup> On this person see J. Pardo Tomás, *Historia de Diego Zapata (1664-1745): médico, polemista y marrano* (in press).

whom Yosef Kaplan is no doubt the most prominent,<sup>40</sup> attribute much importance to the originality – and to the tensions and conflicts that it involved – of the problem posed to Judaism by the incorporation of these new Jews and their way of understanding the religion and lifestyle of its people. As far as circumcision is concerned, there is no doubt that the *converso* world-view ended up by attributing a sacramental value to circumcision similar to that of baptism among the Christians, a value that it had never had within Judaism. This special syncretism of the religion of the *conversos* had serious consequences for the spiritual and religious life of the European Jews. Circumcision and the burden of symbolic or real meanings that the memory of the centuries of 'captivity' alongside the Christians in the Iberian peninsula had shaped came to form a central part of the problems of self-identity of the Jews, among whom religious identity could not always be superimposed on top of other identities prompted by social solidarity, national awareness or other factors. As Yosef Kaplan states, it is necessary to underline 'the centrality of the ritual of circumcision in the western Sephardic diaspora and its great importance in determining the boundaries of Jewish identity among its members'.<sup>41</sup> This idea of 'centrality' seems to be right on the mark, because it can be claimed that, even though it led to appreciably different phenomena, the rite of circumcision was always at the heart of the question of crypto-Judaism in the Iberian peninsula.

On the other hand, we find spiritual leaders of the Nation (as the Jews of Iberian origin were very often called in the documents of the period), such as D'Aguilar, rabbi of the community of Bayonne in the middle of the seventeenth century, defending a sort of minimalistic way of Jewish life (as Kaplan calls it), including the justification or at least toleration of non-circumcision on the part of the *conversos* who, as adults, were arriving on the other side of the Pyrenees. But we can also find Sephardic leaders who were absolutely intransigent and were not slow to formulate arguments in defence of circumcision with a sacramental tone that is closer to Christianity, as was the case of the denunciations made by Rabbi Jacob Sasportas in London in 1664 and aimed at those Jews from Sepharad who refused or hesitated to be circumcised. These removals from the community sometimes went

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Yosef Kaplan, 'The Portuguese Community of Amsterdam in the 17th Century. Between Tradition and Change', in *Society and Community*, A. Haim (ed.), Jerusalem, 1991, pp. 141-71; and 'The Portuguese Community in 17th Century Amsterdam and the Ashkenazi World', in *Dutch Jewish History*, J. Michman (ed.) (Jerusalem, 1989), vol. II, pp. 23-45.

<sup>41</sup> Yosef Kaplan, 'Wayward New Christians and Stubborn New Jews: the Shaping of a Jewish Identity', p. 31.

beyond words. Barely six years after the intervention of Sasportas, the Jew Diego de Mezquita arrived in London, and obtained permission to undergo the ritual for himself and his sons; a few years later, after the death of Diego, it was discovered that he had never been circumcised, and the leaders of the London community refused to allow his burial beside his co-religionists.<sup>42</sup>

In Spain and Portugal they were examined by the inquisitorial physicians to see whether they were *retaxados*, and within the new communities they were examined again to see if they had sealed the pact with Yahweh. In one way or another, the fantasy of the absence or presence of that tiny little piece of skin on their genitals never left them.

This requires us to raise the question of the circumcision of the Sephardim in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries within a context which is much wider than the peninsular geography and the inquisitorial sources, although it remains essential to take them both into consideration as well. In this sense, the treatment of the question of the 'marks' of Jewish identity in different historical contexts is revealing. For example, in the case of the Dutch Jews in the eighteenth century, where it is a question both of their identification by Christians and of distinguishing within the Jewish community itself between the poor Ashkenazi majority and the wealthy Sephardic minority, Jewish identity was sought in physical stereotypes or modes of dress rather than in the issue of circumcision.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, if we turn to an *a priori* more different historical context, that of the German Jews in the twentieth century, we see how the question of circumcision occupies pride of place again.<sup>44</sup> In both cases, the fundamental difference with regard to the problem of the survival of crypto-Judaism in the Iberian peninsula from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century lies in the fact of being *converso* itself, the burden of clandestinity of the bodily mark, the risk of maintaining it in practice, and the strategies to hide it in a society which is engaged not in a persecution aimed at rapid extermination, but in a

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 33–4.

<sup>43</sup> Florike Egmond and Peter Mason, *The Mammoth and the Mouse. Microhistory and Morphology* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp. 83–99.

<sup>44</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, 'Mutilation and Meaning', in *The Body in Parts. Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe*, David Hillman and Carla Mazzio (eds) (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 221–41.

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