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The Mass Conversion of 1495 in South Italy and its Precedents: a Comparative Approach

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Abstract

Forced mass conversions were relatively rare in the Middle Ages but they have a central place in both medieval narratives and modern historiography. A distinction should be made between conversions ordered by Christian rulers, and pressure to convert coming from popular elements. Some well-known examples of the first category are the baptism ordered by the Visigothic rulers in Spain and the forced conversion of the Jews in Portugal. The mass conversion of the Jews of the kingdom of Naples in 1495 belongs to the second category.

The article proposes to analyze the causes leading to the outbursts of violence against Jews in 1495 and the resulting mass conversions by making use of primary sources such as contemporary Italian and Hebrew chronicles, rabbinic *responsa*, and Sicilian material. Finally it proposes a comparison with other events of mass conversion, and principally that of 1391 in Castile and Aragon.

Keywords

conversos – southern Italy – Jews – Christians – expulsion of 1492 – conversion – migration – Sicily – Ferrante I of Naples – Charles VIII of France

Although relatively rare events in the Middle Ages,¹ forced mass conversions have a central place in medieval narratives and modern historiography. The classic comparison is the response of the Jews of Sepharad (broadly

¹ This article only addresses the history of the Jews in Western Christendom; therefore mass conversions in the areas under Byzantine rule remain outside its scope.

defined as Spain) to the pogroms of 1391 and that of the Jews of Ashkenaz (northern France and Germany) to the pogroms and massacres of 1096. The former are criticized for lacking religious commitment, and for being influenced by rationalistic philosophy and skepticism,² whereas the latter are praised for their piety and readiness to embrace martyrdom.³ This approach has been contested in recent studies not only for its simplistic dichotomous nature, but also because new interpretations of extant sources show that it might not be historically correct, either for Ashkenaz,⁴ or for Sepharad.⁵ Most

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- 2 Coined "Averroism" by Yitzhak Baer, this has little to do with the works of Averroes (the Latinized name of the Arabic philosopher Ibn Rushd). Baer claims that Averroistic tendencies, by which he means rationalistic thought and religious skepticism, weakened the religious commitment of Spanish Jewry, especially its socio-economic elite, and predisposed them to accept conversion. See Yitzhak Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, 2 vols., trans. Louis Schoffman (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1992), 2:30–131, 253–59. On Jewish "Averroism," see Daniel Lasker, "Averroistic Trends in Jewish-Christian Polemics in the Late Middle Ages," *Speculum* 55 (1980): 294–504.
 - 3 This approach also permeates the comparisons of the reactions of Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jewries to episodes of violence and forced conversions in Yitzhak Baer's *History*. Jacob Katz argues that "martyrdom marks the highest manifestation in the history of any religion," and that Jews everywhere were willing to accept martyrdom "so long as attachment to tradition was not enfeebled through the undermining influence of rationalism or other spiritual or social factors. The Ashkenazi Middle Ages were not exposed to such subversive forces." Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance: Studies in Jewish-Gentile Relations in Medieval and Modern Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 82–85. Similar views are reflected in Norman Roth's assessment of the events of 1391, which stresses the "voluntary nature of 1391 conversions." Norman Roth, *Conversos, Inquisition, and the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain* (Madison: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 33–47. Recently Shalom Sadik has argued that the conversion of leading figures among Spanish Jewry prior to 1391, such as Petrus Alfonsi and Paulus de Santa Maria, influenced the Jewish masses and weakened their resolve. Shalom Sadik, "Between Ashkenaz and Sefarad: the Ideological Apostate" [in Hebrew], *Hebrew Union College Annual* 82–83 (2011–2012): 61–78.
 - 4 For modern studies on the fate of Ashkenazi Jewries in 1096, see Anna Sapir Abulafia, "The Interrelationship between the Hebrew Chronicles of the First Crusade," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 27 (1982): 221–39; Israel Y. Yuval, "Vengeance and Damnation. Blood and Defamation: From Jewish Martyrdom to Blood Libel Accusations," (in Hebrew), *Zion* 58 (1993): 33–90. David Malkiel offers a comprehensive survey of classic and recent publications concerning the events of 1096 as well as a comparison with those of 1391 that affected Sephardic Jewry. See David Malkiel, *Reconstructing Ashkenaz: The Human Face of Franco-German Jewry, 1000–1250* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).
 - 5 For reinterpretations of the events of 1391, see: Marc Saperstein, "A Sermon on the Akedah from the Generation of the Expulsion and its Implications for 1391," in *Exile and Diaspora: Studies in the History of the Jewish People Presented to Professor Haim Beinart*, ed. Aaron Mirsky, Avraham Grossman, and Yosef Kaplan (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1991), 111–13;

existing comparative studies focus on these events, rarely taking into account other mass conversions that occurred in Western Christendom prior to 1096 and after 1391. The present article proposes to introduce the mass conversions of 1495 in the Kingdom of Naples to the discussion.

A major distinction must be made between forced conversions ordered by Christian rulers, and pressure to convert exerted by popular elements, usually accompanied by riots, plunder, and massacres. Examples of the first type are the well-known forced baptism ordered by the Visigothic rulers,⁶ the less well-known mass conversion of the Jews in south Italy ordered (or at least encouraged) by King Charles II of Anjou,⁷ and the forced conversion of the Jews in Portugal.⁸ The mass conversion of the Jews of the kingdom of Naples in 1495 belongs to the second category.

To date, no systematic examination of the events of 1495 has been undertaken, nor has the resulting social, economic, and political impact of the formation of a large convert population been given due consideration. Although several modern studies refer to the events of 1495, some only present a dry

Ram Ben Shalom, "Kiddush ha-Shem and Jewish Martyrdom in Aragon and Castile in 1391" (in Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 70 (2001): 227–82.

6 For the Visigoth legislation on Jews and converts, see Amnon Linder, *The Jews in the Legal Sources of the Early Middle Ages* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 257–332. On the forced conversions under the Visigoths, see Raul Gonz ales Salinero, *Las conversiones forzadas de los jud os en el reino visigodo* (Rome: Escuela Espa ola de Historia y Arqueolog a en Roma, 2000).

7 The conversion of the Jews in south Italy occurred between 1290 and 1294. Although little is known of the actual circumstances, various sources confirm the presence of numerous converts (*neofiti*) in south Italy from the early fourteenth century onwards. They remained a distinct group for over two hundred years. See Joshua Starr, "The Mass Conversion of Jews in Southern Italy (1290–1293)," *Speculum* 21 (1946): 203–11; Benjamin Scheller, "The Materiality of Difference: Converted Jews and Their Descendants in the Late Medieval Kingdom of Naples," *Medieval History Journal* 12 (2009): 405–30.

8 There are numerous studies on the conversion of the Jews in Portugal ordered by Dom Manuel I in 1497. Selected titles include: Alexandre Herculano, *Da origem e estabelecimento da Inquisi o em Portugal* (Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional, 1854); English edition: Alexandre Herculano, *A History of the Origin and Establishment of the Inquisition in Portugal* (New York: Ktav, 1972); Maria Jos  Pimenta Ferro Tavares, *Os judeus em Portugal no s culo XV*, 2 vols. (Lisbon: Univ. Nova de Lisboa, 1982); Tavares, *Los jud os en Portugal* (Madrid: Mapfre, 1990). For a recent analysis of the conversion and the events leading to it, see Fran ois Soyer, *The Persecution of the Jews and Muslims of Portugal* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 183–241.

recitation of the bare facts;⁹ others do not consult the Hebrew sources.¹⁰ An invaluable contribution to the history of the Jews in southern Italy are the documents published by Cesare Colafemmina and others in the periodical *Sefer Yuhasin*, as are Colafemmina's documentary collections for the various Neapolitan provinces: Calabria, Apulia, Basilicata, etc.¹¹ Unfortunately, because most of these documents describe the situation of the Jewish communities before and after the riots of 1495, there is little information on the crucial period of the French invasion.

In order to gain a better understanding of the mass conversions of 1495 I first draw attention to the growing tensions between Christians and Jews during the reign of Ferrante I, which perhaps explain some of the violent outbursts that broke out shortly after the king's death. Then, making use of contemporary Italian and Hebrew chronicles, rabbinic responsa, and Sicilian material that has recently come to light, I examine the events of 1495 and their aftermath. Lastly, I propose a comparison with other events of mass conversion, principally that of 1391 in Castile and Aragon. I suggest that unchecked outbreaks of violence against the Jews, lack of royal protection and anarchic conditions, as well as pre-existing social and economic tensions, constitute a matrix that has the potential to transform such events into a demand for mass conversion. Such comparison is justified in view of the fact that Naples presents a political and cultural ambient that is closer to the Spanish experience than to the Ashkenazi one. For one thing, Naples was ruled during this period by the house of Aragon; for another, the Jews of south Italy lived all over the kingdom in relatively large communities (as did Spanish Jewry); and, finally, the presence of Spanish and Sicilian exiles there in the aftermath of the expulsions of 1492 rendered it even closer to the Sephardic experience.

9 Nicola Ferorelli, *Gli ebrei nell'Italia meridionale*, ed. Filena Patroni Griffi, updated edition (Naples: Peerson, 1990 [first published: Turin: Vessillo Israelitico, 1915]) mentions the riots and the attacks against the Jews of the kingdom and the resulting conversions, but offers no analysis. Felipe Ruiz Martín has little to add to Ferorelli's description of the events of 1495. See Felipe Ruiz Martín, "La expulsión de los judíos del reino de Nápoles," *Hispania* 9 (1949): 28–240. A scant two pages (37–39) are devoted to the events of 1495. Moreover, he tends to minimize the extent of the conversions and their violent aspect.

10 Viviana Bonazzoli, "Gli ebrei nel regno di Napoli all'epoca della loro espulsione," *Archivio Storico Italiano* 137 (1979): 495–599; 139; (1981): 179–287, covers the period from 1456 to 1541 and offers an updated study, up to the 1970s, which takes into account the material that has been discovered and published since the publication of Ferorelli's book. However, Bonazzoli has little to add on this topic, and in any case, does not include Hebrew sources.

11 Cesare Colafemmina, *The Jews in Calabria* (Leiden: Brill, 2012); hereafter, Colafemmina, *Calabria*; Cesare Colafemmina, *Documenti per la storia degli ebrei in Puglia nell'archivio di stato di Napoli* (Bari: Istituto ecumenico S. Nicola, 1990), hereafter, Colafemmina, *Puglia*.

1 The King, the Jews, and the Local Population

Jewish-Hebrew chronicles depict King Ferrante I as “a wise and mighty man ... righteous among the nations.”¹² The king is praised for his readiness to allow Jews expelled in 1492 from Spain and Sicily to settle in his kingdom. Also attesting to his favorable attitude toward Jews is the earlier granting of several privileges, such as the 1476 one in which he declared that he loved and cared for the Jews, not just those living in his kingdom, but also foreigners who came to settle there. Later, in 1492, the king promised the Jews who had come from outside his realm (*extra regnum*) the same rights as those enjoyed by the long-standing Jewish population, namely, that they would be “held and known as his subjects and vassals as if they were born in the *Regnum*.”¹³ Some modern scholars tend to accept at face value Ferrante’s image as a king who loved the Jews.¹⁴ Others suggest more pragmatic reasons for Ferrante’s favor, arguing that the Jews were simply a financial asset for the king, and that the offers of protection and privileges must be placed within the traditional ruler-Jew context, as the latter were considered *servi camerae regis*.¹⁵ Whereas this may have

12 “איש חכם וגבור ... מחסידי אומות העולם”: Elijah Capsali, *Seder Eliyahu Zuta*, 3 vols., ed. Aryeh Shmuelevitch, Shelomo Simonsohn, and Meir Benayahu (Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1975), 1:212. An anonymous Hebrew chronicle also praises Ferrante for the compassion he manifested toward the refugees of 1492: “And this was a king that loved the Jews and received them all and showed them mercy and gave them money” (MS Parma, Biblioteca Palatina, Cod. Parm. 2420 [microfilm F 13285 at the Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts, National Library of Israel]); Alexander Marx, “The Expulsion of the Jews from Spain,” in *Studies in Jewish History and Booklore* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1944), 86–87 (English translation is Marx’s).

13 Naples, State Archive (hereafter NSA), Camera Sommaria, Com. 33, fols. 174 and 157; Camera Sommaria, Com. 35 fol. 106; NSA, Camera Sommaria, Partium 35, fol. 116; NSA, Camera Sommaria Partium 36, fol. 127, cited by Ferorelli, *Gli ebrei*, 93–94 nn. 58, 59. Ferrante’s sentiments towards the Jews are expressed in a privilege granted in 1476: “Nos tamen ... ipsos Iudeos et quemlibet ipsorum tam marem quam feminam tam regniculum nostrum quam externum hoc regnum nostrum incolantem et inhabitantem amamus atque diligimus, et ipsius Iudeis et cuilibet eorum favori et auxilio semper fuimus et erimus ...” (NSA, Camera Sommaria, Privilegiorum, fols. 15–19, reproduced in Colafemmina, *Calabria*, 255–56). Unfortunately, the original documents have been lost and only copies and quotes survive.

14 Some modern scholars support this view. See Colafemmina, *Puglia*, 11; David Abulafia, “The Aragonese Kings of Naples and the Jews,” in *The Jews of Italy: Memory and Identity, Studies and Texts in Jewish History and Culture*, ed. Bernard D. Cooperman and Barbara Garvin (Bethesda: University Press of Maryland, 2000), 82–106 at 94.

15 Giuseppe Petralia, “L’epoca aragonese,” in *Lebraismo dell’Italia meridionale dalle origini al 1541*, ed. Cosimo Damiano Fonseca, Michele Luzzatti, Giulio Tamani, Cesare Colafemmina (Galatina: Congedo, 1996), 79–114. The term *servi camerae regis* appears in various royal

been true for the older Jewish communities of the kingdom, it was unlikely that Ferrante regarded the impoverished exiles as a source of income. A more apt explanation, in my view, is that Ferrante hoped to strengthen the kingdom's economy by encouraging skilled Jewish artisans and merchants to settle there, a conclusion supported by the royal order calling for registration of the newcomers' skills and professions. The refugees were not simply welcomed by King Ferrante and left to their own devices; instead, a bureaucratic machine was put into motion to receive them. Port authorities were instructed to register all newcomers, their lands of origin, the ship on which they arrived, their skills, and the number of children (male and female) they had, among other details. After registering, they were allowed to choose "any city, land, or place or go from one place to another within the kingdom."¹⁶

Ferrante's support of the Jews reflects the traditional pattern of the royal-Jewish relationship, especially as it evolved in the Iberian kingdoms. The king needed the Jews' taxpaying abilities to ensure a stable source of income, and they always constituted a loyal element of the population. Often, anti-Jewish violence was a form of rebellion against the ruler; concurrently, the king's ability to protect his Jews was a measure of his power. As for the Jews, one can note Hayim Yosef Yerushalmi's apt comment in his discussion of the image of the king in Jewish eyes: "Throughout medieval Christian Europe the Jews inevitably, yet willingly, allied themselves to the Crown as the best and, ultimately, the only guarantor of stability and security."¹⁷

Ferrante ruled his kingdom craftily and with an iron fist, suppressing dissent. Notwithstanding, acts of violence against the Jews did occur in certain

privileges from the twelfth century onwards. It is not easy to translate or define, but is used to indicate a special relationship between the king and "his Jews." See Kenneth Stow, "Servi camerae nostrae," *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed. Joseph R. Strayer, 13 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1982–1989), 11: 209–11. For aspects particular to the Mediterranean lands, see David Abulafia, "The Servitude of Jews and Muslims in the Medieval Mediterranean," *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome* 112 (2000): 687–714; Ilan Shoval, "Servi Regis' Re-Examined: On the Significance of the Earliest Appearance of the Term in Aragon, 1176," *Hispania Judaica Bulletin* 4 (2004): 22–69. However, a comprehensive discussion of the term goes beyond the scope of the present study, and in any case it was never explicitly used by Ferrante.

16 NSA, Camera Sommaria Partium, 35, fol. 116, cited by Ferorelli, *Gli ebrei*, 94 n. 60 and NSA, Camera Sommaria Com. 35, fols. 31 and 106, also cited by Ferorelli, *Gli ebrei*, 94 n. 61. Unfortunately, these documents are no longer extant (as are many of the sources cited by Ferorelli).

17 Hayim Y. Yerushalmi, "The Lisbon Massacre of 1506 and the Royal Image in the 'Shebet Yehudah,'" *Hebrew Union College Annual Supplement* 1 (1976): 37–58 at 37.

places even during his reign. The activities in which the Jews engaged as merchants, moneylenders, and, more often than not as pawnshop operators, had the potential to spark resentment. In fact, popular resentment against the Jews' involvement in money lending led to outbursts of violence on various occasions throughout medieval Europe. Destruction of credit bills held by the Jews figure in many medieval revolts against royal power. It happened during the barons' revolt in England ca. 1260, in the Spanish kingdoms in 1391, and in Sicily in 1474.¹⁸ Another reason for popular disaffection was the taxation system in the kingdom of Naples. The Jews were taxed separately and their tax payments went to directly the king's treasury and were therefore not part of the total tax paid by the city. In times of economic crisis the Jews aroused particular resentment both because they did not contribute to the city's tax burden and because, as moneylenders, they were hated for seeming to take advantage of the ordinary people's poverty and need. The town of Lecce exemplifies this state of affairs: it was the site of several anti-Jewish incidents from the 1460s onward, culminating in the riots and forced conversions of 1495.

The first anti-Jewish outbursts took place there in the 1460s, when the city faced an economic crisis following its transfer into royal hands after the death of Prince Giovanni Antonio del Balzo, the city's feudal ruler. The king, who had enacted taxation and policy changes, supported the Jews and opposed the city's attempts to expel them. Also sparking economic crisis in this region was the wave of immigration from the Adriatic coast in the aftermath of the Ottoman conquests, which caused food shortages and high prices. Matters were further exacerbated by the Ottoman occupation of Otranto in 1480, and the passage of troops (Christian as well as Turkish) through the city that caused general

18 Money lending in Naples: from 1468 the Jews were allowed to lend money at an interest of 36% for sums up to 50 ducats, and an interest of 24% for sums above that. On Jewish loans and pawns in the Kingdom of Naples, see Alfonso Silvestri, "Gli ebrei nel Regno di Napoli durante la dominazione aragonese," *Campania Sacra* 18 (1987): 21–77; Filena Patroni Griffi, *Il Banco di Gabriele e Mosè: Un registro di pegni del 1495* (Cava de' Tirreni: Avagliano, 2000), 16–17. England: Robert Stacey, "The English Jews under Henry III," *The Jews in Medieval Britain. Historical, Literary and Archaeological Perspective*, ed. Patricia Skinner (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2003): 41–54; Spain: Philip Wolff, "The 1391 Pogrom in Spain: Social Crisis or Not?" *Past and Present* 50 (1971): 4–18; Angus MacKay, "Popular Movements and Pogroms in Fifteenth Century Castile," *Past and Present* 55 (1972): 33–67; Natalie Oeltjen, "King, Creditors and Converts: the impact of royal policy and corporate debt on the collective identity of Majorcan Conversos after 1391," *Sefarad* 73.1 (2013): 133–164. Sicily: Giuseppe Palermo, "New Evidence about the Slaughter of the Jews in Modica, Noto and Elsewhere in Sicily (1474)," *Henoah* 22 (2000): 247–317 (doc. no. 20, 307–309).

devastation followed by an outbreak of epidemics.¹⁹ From this period until the 1490s, Christian-Jewish relations deteriorated considerably. The city ordinances contain several regulations regarding the Jews that, despite having existed throughout the Middle Ages, were not rigorously enforced before. Some, such as the tax on usury—a measure that, although directed at both Jews and Christians, probably mainly affected the Jews—were intended to limit their economic activities; others, such as a tax on butchered meat (affecting ritual kosher slaughter), aimed to encumber the daily practice of Jewish life; and finally, some, such as the demand that they wear the special Jewish badge, and that they be prohibited from touching food to be eaten by Christians during the period of Lent, sought to segregate the Jews from, and limit their contacts with, the Christian population.²⁰ Although such anti-Jewish practices were not confined to Lecce or this specific period, they represent a break with a previous, more favorable climate as regards Christian Jewish relations in Apulia, and Lecce in particular.

The arrival of refugees from Spain and Sicily in 1492 placed a considerable strain on the local population of the kingdom. According to a petition addressed to the Camera Sommaria,²¹ some twenty thousand Jews had settled in the kingdom of Naples by 1493, a considerable number to be absorbed by a population of at most 1,100,100.²² This recently discovered document resolves the debate regarding the number of immigrants.²³ But as immigrants

19 Giovanni Guerrieri, "Gli ebrei a Brindisi ed a Lecce," *Studi Senesi* 17 (1900): 225–52; Carmela Massaro, "Ebrei e città nel mezzogiorno medievale: il caso di Lecce," *Itinerari di ricerca storica* 5 (1991): 9–50.

20 "Che li Iudei portino lo signo ...," and "Item, che nullo Iudio o Iudia in lo tempo de la quadregesima non ausa ne debbia toccare cosa alcuna de mangiare che se vende ..." (Guerrieri, "Gli ebrei," 230). For the perception that Jewish touch renders food unfit for Christians, see Maurice Kriegel, "Un trait de psychologie sociale dans les pays méditerranéens du bas Moyen Age: le Juif comme intouchable," *Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilizations* 31 (1976): 326–30.

21 The Sommaria (sometimes spelled Summaria) was the supreme financial tribunal in the Kingdom of Naples. As this was the organ in charge of taxation, and since one of its officials acted as the Jews' general bailiff and judge ordinary, most information concerning the Jews comes from Sommaria documents.

22 NSA, Sommaria, Partium, 35, fols. 255v–256r, dated July 1493, is cited by Eleni Sakellariou, *Southern Italy in the Late Middle Ages: Demographic, Institutional and Economic Change in the Kingdom of Naples, c. 1440–c. 1530* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 341–42. On this document and its significance, see: Nadia Zeldes, "The Reception of Spanish and Sicilian Exiles by the Populace in the Kingdom of Naples" *Zion* 82 (2017): 37–58. Eleni Sakellariou calculates that in 1447 the population of the entire kingdom ranged between 890,080 and 1,100,100 (*ibid.*, 439–47).

23 Robert Bonfil calculated the number of Sephardic newcomers as 15,000 (not far from the estimate given in the petition), but did not take the Sicilians into account. See Robert

kept coming after 1493, their numbers in 1495 may have exceeded twenty thousand.²⁴ The introduction of such a large number of newcomers undoubtedly placed pressure on the kingdom's resources and sparked the antagonism of the local Christian population.

Another factor that enhanced Christian enmity toward the Jews was the epidemic brought by the hapless immigrants, which killed thousands. Antonio Stanga, the Milanese ambassador in Naples, wrote at the beginning of 1493 about an outbreak of the plague which he attributed to the immigrant Jews, "most of whom are poor, reduced to beggary and smelly, and as a consequence they are in such a state and numbers [that they are] capable of infecting not only a city, but an entire large province."²⁵ Contemporary chronicles claim that the epidemic killed between twenty- and fifty-thousand people and they attribute the outburst of the plague to the newcomers. According to Giuliano Passero, "about thirty thousand Christians are considered to have died of that death, and twenty-five thousand Jews from those who came to this kingdom, and they were the cause of that death." While Tommaso de Catania provides the dates for the beginning and end of the plague, "the dying began in Naples in January and ended in the month of September of 1493, and about thirty thousand Christians have died, and so did twenty thousand Jews who came that year, and they were the cause of this dying."²⁶

Bonfil, "Italia: un triste epílogo de la expulsión de los judíos de España," in *Judíos, Sefarditas, Conversos: La expulsión de 1492 y sus consecuencias; Ponencias del Congreso Internacional celebrado en Nueva York en noviembre de 1992*, ed. Ángel Alcalá (Valladolid: Ámbito, 1995), 148–249. In any case, even before the discovery of this new source, Ferorelli's estimate of one hundred thousand refugees was considered unfounded (*Gli ebrei*, 103).

24 Pre-modern demographical estimates are usually based on taxation records and as such they underestimate the actual numbers (the poor are often under-represented in this type of document). In this case, however, it should be taken into consideration that refugees kept coming to southern Italy after 1493: some directly from Portugal, others after a sojourn in North Africa (see, e.g., the account of Judah Ḥayyat, note 45 below). According to Ferorelli, the number of local Jews was about 50,000 (*Gli ebrei*, 103–4).

25 The text is cited by Ferorelli, *Gli ebrei*, 97–98.

26 Twenty thousand dead. See *Una cronaca napoletana figurata del Quattrocento*, ed. Riccardo Filangieri (Naples: L'arte tipografica, 1956), 80–81; Giuliano Passero: "nella quale moria se annumerano esservi morti delle persone trenta milia christiani, et venticinque milia judei di quilli, che erano venuti in questo regno, et questi foro causa di detta moria" (*Cittadino Napoletano o sia Prima pubblicazione in istampa, che delle Storie in forma di Giornali, le quali sotto nome di questo Autore finora erano andate manoscritte*, ed. Michele Maria Vecchioni [Naples, 1785], 56); and "di gennaro icomensò la moria in Napoli, et finio il mese de Settembre de lo anno 1493, dove nge morsero da trenta milla cristiani et viginta milla judei che vennero in quillo anno, et epsi foro causa de detta moria" (Tommaso de Catania, *Chroniche antiquissime dall'anno DCCCCLXXXVI fino al MDLII*, in *Raccolta di varie croniche, diarii et altri opusculi cosi italiani come latini appartenenti alla storia del*

Elijah Capsali's Hebrew chronicle underscores tensions between the king and the populace during the outbreak, claiming that the latter addressed themselves to the monarch crying:

What have you done to us, taking in these people who infect us as we might be annihilated, us and our children ... and the people of the land were filled with hatred for the miserable Jews, and they came to dread the people of Israel, they were as thorns in their eyes.²⁷

Can Capsali be viewed as a trustworthy source? According to recent research, Capsali experienced some difficulty in reading Latin script,²⁸ but he might have easily gleaned his information from oral informants rather than written sources. This, however, does not preclude his offering an accurate account regarding historical events and the fate of the Jews in south Italy. His narrative is certainly not impartial, but there is little reason to doubt his description of the anti-Jewish sentiments awakened by the plague.²⁹

In examining attitudes toward Jews, another factor to be considered is the religious scene in the Kingdom of Naples, of which little is known, however. The only preacher of note around that time was the Franciscan friar Roberto Caracciolo (1425–1495). Caracciolo was born in Lecce and lived there for varying periods during the second half of the fifteenth century. From 1488 until his death in 1495 he stayed in his city of birth where he composed his *Mirror of the Faith* (*Specchio della fede*), a work containing frequent anti-Jewish references, such as their description as “a most perverse nation” (*perversissima gente*) and “murderers of Christians” (*uccisori dei cristiani*), alongside a reiteration of the old accusation that Jews smell.³⁰ However, he died before the outburst of anti-Jewish riots in Lecce in February and March 1495.

Regno di Napoli, 7 vols. [Naples, 1780], 1:38. These estimates are more or less confirmed by Capsali's *Seder Eliyahu Zuta*, 1:212–13.

27 Hebrew text: “מה זאת עשית לנו לקבל האנשי” [ם] הללו ולהדביק בנו המגפה ונשמדנו” אנו ובנינו ... אז שנאו עם הארץ את היהודים האמללים ויקוצו מפני בני ישראל כקוצים היו בעיניהם,” Capsali, *Seder Eliyahu Zuta*, 1:213. References to the Bible and Rabbinical literature in the text: “Miserable Jews”: paraphrase of Nehemiah 3:34; “came to dread”: paraphrase of Exodus 1:12; “as thorns in their eyes”: Exodus Rabbah, 1.

28 This conclusion is the result of a careful analysis of Capsali's *Chronicle of the “Kings” of Venice*. See Giacomo Corazzol, “On the Sources of Elijah Capsali's Chronicle of the “Kings” of Venice,” *Mediterranean Historical Review* 27 (2012): 151–60.

29 Capsali, *Seder Eliyahu Zuta*, 1: 212–13 (see note 27 above).

30 Massaro, “Il caso di Lecce,” 39–40; Marecello Semeraro, “Fra Roberto Caracciolo e gli ebrei,” in *Studi Storici*, ed. Cesare Colafemmina (Molfetta: Ecumenica, 1975), 43–60.

A far more serious threat was the so-called prophecy of St. Cathaldus. The main source for the story of the prophecy is Giovanni Pontano (1426–1503), the humanist who served as Ferrante I's secretary. According to Pontano, a Franciscan friar named Francisco, of Spanish origins, claimed to have discovered a lead tablet buried under the chapel of St. Cathaldus in Taranto.

Then, since he [the Franciscan] could not persuade King Ferdinand [Ferrante I] by any means to chase the Jews from his kingdom, as his cousin Ferdinand of Spain had done, as the king was staying in Taranto, he invented this fiction: he hid a lead tablet, inscribed by himself on the sly, in the ruined sanctuary of Saint Cathaldus not far from Taranto, under a wall. Three years later he brought it to light, after having bribed a priest to whom he said that Saint Cathaldus appeared to him in a dream, showing him where the tablet was hidden ... After having disinterred it, he wished to bring it before the king ... That man was instructed to warn the king that he would bring on himself God's anger, and future disaster and calamity if he did not obey the writing on the tablet. And the text, by certain circumlocutions and distorted words, ordered the banishment of the Jews. But the king, after having seen the tablet, discovered the fraud. Having discovered it, he did not invite Francisco to read it together thinking that the friar would interpret the words as it pleased him, therefore the king chose to dissimulate his understanding of the facts with the greatest caution and discretion.³¹

The friar was identified by Giampaolo Tognetti as Francisco de Aragona, confessor of Count Diomedede Carafa, an important personage at the Neapolitan court.³² The lead tablet purportedly contained a prophecy announcing the fall of the royal house of Aragon (that is, Ferrante's dynasty) unless the king ordered the expulsion of the Jews, as his cousin Ferdinand (the Catholic) had already done. Pontano describes the friar's audience with Ferrante I and praises the king for refusing to discuss the prophecy, claiming he did not understand the confused text. The friar did not give up and preached about the prophecy,

31 Giovanni Giovano Pontano, *De Sermone*, ed. and trans. Florence Bistagne (Paris: H. Champion, 2008), book 2, chap. 12, 169–70 [Here and in subsequent notes the English translations are mine, unless stated otherwise].

32 Giampaolo Tognetti, "Le fortune della pretesa profezia di San Cataldo," *Bulletino dell'Istituto storico italiano per il medio evo e archivio Muratoriano* 80 (1968): 273–317 (identification of the friar: 274–75).

creating such furor and turmoil that “he inflamed almost all of Italy, and first and foremost the Pope.”³³

Ferrante’s refusal to consider the prophecy is consistent with his generally favorable attitude toward the Jews and his tendency to disregard criticism of his policies. Thus, there was little overt expression of popular resentment or opposition to the Jewish presence during Ferrante’s lifetime.

2 Worsening Jewish-Christian Relations: 1494

Ferrante I died on 25 January 1494 and was succeeded by his son Alfonso II who abdicated a year later. Although there were no widespread anti-Jewish riots during Alfonso’s reign, several violent incidents attest to the growing enmity toward the kingdom’s Jews in this period. Lecce in the Salento region had already been the scene of several anti-Jewish incidents during Ferrante’s reign, but the old king forced the city to recall the Jews it expelled and reinstate their rights and privileges. On Easter 1494, shortly after Ferrante’s death, a group of Christian youths of Lecce traced crosses on their brows, protesting the fact that the wearing of the special Jewish badge was not enforced in their city.³⁴ The red badge in the form of the Greek letter θ was imposed on the Jews of southern Italy already by Charles II of Anjou (1285–1309) but it was not enforced during Ferrante’s reign. The demand that the badge should be strictly enforced should be understood as criticism of Ferrante’s lenient attitudes towards the Jews, and an increase in anti-Jewish feelings.

Letters issued by the Sommaria during 1494 show that the anti-Jewish atmosphere around Easter 1494 was not confined to Lecce. In March 1494, the Jews of Brindisi complained that they had been insulted, threatened, and subjected to stone-throwing at them and at their houses, particularly by masked individuals. Following their complaint, the *capitano* of Brindisi was ordered to protect the Jews during Holy Week. The order by the Sommaria reminds the addressee that Jews enjoyed royal protection and that he should do everything in his power to prevent acts of violence during Holy Week, as at other times, especially on Good Friday. A similar letter was sent to the *capitano* of Trani.³⁵

33 Pontano, *De sermone*.

34 “In questo anno in la città di Lecce ne la festa de la resurreccione certi Zovani de moto loro vedendo che judei non portavano singho essere conosciuti portavano la croce in capo ...” Antonello Coniger, “Cronache,” in *Raccolta di varie chroniche, diarii, ed altri opuscoli appartenenti alla storia del regno di Napoli*, 5 vols., ed. A. Pelliccia (Naples, 1782), 5:29.

35 NSA, Sommaria, Partium 40, fols. 74v–75r; Colafemmina, *Puglia*, 127.

A few days later, on 20 March, the Sommaria sent a letter to the bishop of Trani, asking him to protect the Jews from the attacks and insults of priests and the bishop's men and reminding him of the privileges and protection granted by King Ferrante.³⁶ These complaints, and the need to remind local officials and the clergy of the former king's policy toward his Jewish subjects, show that their position had begun to deteriorate almost immediately upon Ferrante's death.

Other aspects of Jewish-Christian relations, such as debt collection and the honoring of business deals, also seem to have taken a turn for the worse in this period. Mosè and Mayr de Balmes (sons of the king's physician Abraham de Balmes) of Lecce had to turn to the Sommaria in order to force their debtors to honor their debts and business obligations.³⁷ Similar orders were dispatched during the summer of 1494 to the *capitano* of Molfetta concerning the debtors of the Jew Isaac L'Argentière, and to the *capitano* of San Severo concerning the collection of debts owed to the local Jews.³⁸ Attempts to avoid payment of debts were probably widespread. In any event, a number of admonitory letters by the Sommaria to local authorities treating debts owed to the Jews have survived. The letters were dispatched to various locations in the province of Apulia: Nardò, Bitonto, and Corato, among others.

36 NSA, Sommaria, Partium 40, fol. 113v; Colafemmina, *Puglia*, 129. Stoning the Jews, attacks on the Jewish quarter during the Holy Week and certain Christian feasts, are constant features of daily life in the Middle Ages, see: David Nirenberg, *Communités of Violence. Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 200–30; but here it is argued that such attacks became more frequent and more violent than they had been before 1494; moreover, such a cluster of complaints appearing in a short period of time and in several places concomitantly signals a deterioration of inter-community relations.

37 NSA, Sommaria, Partium 39, fol. 64r; Colafemmina, *Puglia*, 138. On the Balmes family, see Ferorelli, *Gli ebrei*, 263–78. However, Abraham ben Moses de Balmes of Lecce, the physician of Ferrante I, should not be confused with his grandson, Abraham ben Meir de Balmes, a philosophical-kabbalistic thinker who moved to Venice after 1510 and became Cardinal Domenico Grimani's personal physician. He died in 1523. See Brian Ogren, "Sefirotic Depiction, Divine Noesis, and Aristotelian Kabbalah: Abraham ben Meir de Balmes and Italian Renaissance Thought," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 104 (2014): 576–79; Fabrizio Lelli, "Gli ebrei nel Salento: primi risultati delle ricerche in corso," in *Gli ebrei nel Salento: Secoli IX–XVI*, ed. Fabrizio Lelli (Lecce: Congedo, 2013), 9–41 (on Balmes, 31–34).

38 Isaac L'Argentière: NSA, Sommaria, Partium 39, fols. 86r–v; Colafemmina, *Puglia*, 143–44; San Severo: NSA, Sommaria, Partium 39, fols. 78v–79r; Colafemmina, *Puglia*, 144–45.

3 The Events of 1495

In January 1495 King Alfonso II abdicated in favor of his son Ferrando (also known as Ferrante II), embarking for Sicily on 3 February. Meanwhile Ferrando was engaged in a losing battle with the French forces that were approaching Naples.³⁹ After Capua transferred its allegiance to the king of France, Ferrando returned to Naples and found that riots had broken out there.

Notar Giacomo, one of the most reliable sources for the history of Naples in this period, describes the beginning of the anti-Jewish riots of 1495 as follows:

And in Naples, on 18 February (1495), on a Wednesday, all the Jews of Naples were robbed and so it happened all over the kingdom, as well as in the castle of Capuana, because the nobles let the people understand that everybody should go to the walls [of the city], as the Swiss⁴⁰ wanted to enter the city and the said nobles started robbing the said Jews and the castle of Capuana; and because on 19 [February] King Ferrando II returned to Naples and commenced to give many horses and mules to the nobles, and the royal stables and the arsenal were sacked and burned, and the same was done to the arsenal and the Ferrandine shipyard ...⁴¹

According to Notar Giacomo, the initial outburst against the Jews was sudden and unexplained. Not so the sack of the castle of Capuana and the attack on the Jews who sought refuge in it, which appear to have been part of a more generalized riot that did not target the Jews alone. But a more informed explanation for the initial outburst against the Jews appears in the Venetian Marino

39 Ferorelli, *Gli ebrei*, 199–211. On the French invasion of the Kingdom of Naples, see David Abulafia, *The Western Mediterranean Kingdoms: The Struggle for Dominion* (London: Longman, 1997), 248–49, and the bibliography cited there; David Abulafia, ed., *The French Descent into Renaissance Italy* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1995), introduction; Ernest Belenguer, *Ferdinando e Isabella: I re cattolici nella politica europea del rinascimento*, trans. Donatella Gagliardi and Francesca Canale Cama (Rome: Salerno, 2001), 209–35.

40 Swiss mercenaries were part of both King Ferrando's army and the French army of invasion.

41 "Dove che innapoli ali XVIII defebrero de mercoridi 1495 foro sacchizati innapoli tucti li iudey et pertucto lo regno si ancho lo castello decapuana perche li gentilomini donaro ad intendere che ogni uno devesse andare alle mura per che li sguizari volevano intrare et dicti gentilomini se possero ad sacchizare dicti iudei et lo castello decapuana perelche ali XVIII decto dicto re ferrando secundo retormo innapoli et incomenzo ad donare multi cavalli et muli ad piu gentilomini et fo sacchizata la cavallaricia si ancho lo terzanale et depo posto foco, adicto tarzenale et alla nave ferrandina" (*Cronica di Napoli di Notar Giacomo*, ed. Paolo Grazilli [Naples, 1845], 186).

Sanuto's account of King Charles VIII's Italian expedition.⁴² Sanuto gives an earlier date for the beginning of the troubles; according to this source, the first outburst occurred between 26 and 27 January 1495 (about three weeks before the date given by Notar Giacomo). In January 1495, shortly before the beginning of the riots in Naples, the city of Aquila had surrendered to the French on condition that they not enter the city. Nevertheless, disregarding the terms of surrender, French soldiers entered Aquila and killed eighty townspeople. Although Sanuto does not say so explicitly, it seems that what happened in Aquila contributed to the atmosphere of fear and anarchy. The people of Naples realized that they now held considerable power over the king: on the one hand they could surrender to the French (but did not really want to); on the other, even if they decided to remain loyal to Ferrando, they could impose conditions. As the king was the Jews' mainstay, the weakening of royal power meant that the Jews were now unprotected. Moreover, the king now had to listen to popular demands. Marino Sanuto also hints that the refugee problem was indeed one of the main reasons underlying popular disaffection:

The Neapolitans, seeing that the people acted in such a manner [referring to the happenings in Aquila], on 26 and 27 [January] they rose against the Jews and *marrani*, and having realized that [King] Ferrando could no do more than try to silence the people, and as by chance it so happened that two ships carrying Jews had just arrived there ... the people became more and more agitated and some of them mistreated [the newcomers], and they [the people] told the king that they did not want any more *marrani* or Jews in Naples. And the king ordered them to depart and so they hired ships going to Barbary, Alexandria or Constantinople. [But] the rich *marrani* remained at home. [And the king issued] an edict decreeing that all the pawned items that the Jews kept on hand and those they had put in the banks should be returned to the owners in order to alleviate the scandal, even if the terms of payment and the usury were put in writing that [the money] should be paid on a certain date; and [it happened] not only in Naples, but in the entire kingdom, and in Apulia, where in many

42 The Venetian historian Marino Sanuto (1466–1536) is mainly known for his journals, *I Diarii*, ed. R. Fulin (Venice, 1884). Here, however, I rely on his account of the expedition of Charles VIII which offers many insights on the events of 1495 and the fate of the Jews in the kingdom of Naples. The following citations are from M. Sanuto, *La Spedizione di Carlo VIII in Italia*, ed. R. Fulin (Venice: Tip. M. Vesentini, 1883).

places there was great destruction of Jewish property. And even though [the king made] this provision, it did not prevent the sacking.⁴³

The trigger for this outburst was the January 1495 docking of two ships carrying Jews and *marrani* in Naples. After the arrival of a huge number of immigrants in 1492–1493, the presence of new immigrants, even just two refugee ships, caused uproar. The people of Naples did not want additional Jews or converts.

Sanuto provides no information as to these refugees' identity and we can only speculate on the basis of the known waves of emigration in the wake of the expulsions from the Spanish kingdoms. An important source in this regard is Judah Ḥayyat's introduction to his *Minḥat Yehudah*. Ḥayyat recounts how in the winter of 1493, after King João II ordered the Spanish exiles to leave Portugal, he and his family sailed from Lisbon together with two hundred and fifty refugees. João's order is confirmed by several sources. Already in February 1493 the king had approved an ordinance passed by the town council of Benavente (close to the border with Castile) to expel the Castilian Jews from that town. According to other sources, the king ordered most of the exiles to leave Portugal before April 1493.⁴⁴ The timetable reflected by Ḥayyat's account explains how it is possible, or even probable, that the arrival of the ships in question was related to that expulsion. Ḥayyat describes the circumstances which forced the refugees to spend more than six months on board, because they were not allowed to land anywhere for the first four months, and then, after being captured by a Basque ship, were forced to remain in Malaga for two more months (while attempts were made to force them to convert). After that, he and other refugees had to face extremely difficult conditions in North Africa. Many months later he arrived in Naples only to be robbed and beaten

43 "Napolitani vedendo che el populo havea fatto quelle moveste, a di 26 et 27 Zener [1495], contra zudei et marani, et che Ferando al meglio havea potuto tasentò quel populo, et a caso ivi era gionto do navillii di zudei ... più el populo se inanimò, et parte fonno malamenati, et disseno al Re non volevano nè marani nè zudei più in Napoli. Et el Re ordinò dovesseno partirsi, et cussì nolizono navillii chi per Barbaria, chi per Alexandria, et chi per Constantinopoli. Li marani ricchi steveno in caxa. Or fu fatto uno editto che tutti li pegni che zudei si ritrovava in le man, et quelli tenivano banco, et cadauno dovesseno per obviar li scandoli render de chi erano, tamen che li fuesse uno scritto di pagarli lo cavedal et usura infra tanto termine, et non solamente in Napoli ma per tutto el Reame et in la Puia, dove in varii luogi contra zudei era fatto gran destrusione. Et ben che fusse fatto questa provisione, per questo non restò che non fusse sachizati" (Marino Sanuto, *La Spedizione*, 206).

44 Soyer, *Persecution of the Jews and Muslims*, 116, 123–28.

by the French soldiery.⁴⁵ Ḥayyat left South Italy and finally settled in Mantua. Ḥayyat's account, which offers instructive testimony on the route taken by Sephardic refugees who were forced to leave Portugal in the winter of 1493, explains how it was possible for a number of them to have arrived in Naples around the 1495 riots. Sanuto mentions the coming of *marrani* together with the Jews. In Italian sources, the term *marrani* frequently designates converted Jews of Spanish (or Portuguese) origin, but can also refer to unconverted Sephardic Jews. It is occasionally used as a derogatory term for anyone hailing from Spain, including Old Christians.⁴⁶ Sanuto, however, employs the term in its original meaning. As he devotes an entire paragraph to the converso problem in Spain, the need for an Inquisition, and praise for the policies of the Catholic kings,⁴⁷ the *marrani* he mentions were, in all likelihood, converted Jews from Spanish territories. The presence of Spanish converts on the ships, alongside Jews, supports my hypothesis that the newcomers were Castilian Jews and converts who were expelled from Portugal.

45 Judah Ḥayyat, *Minḥat Yehudah: Peyrush le-sefer ma'arekhet ha-elokut* [Offering of Judah: Commentary to the Book of the Divine Order] (Mantua, 1558), 7–8. Hebrew text: "נסענו אני וביתי עם מאתים וחמשים נפשות בספינה אחת באמצע החרף בשנת רנ"ג מליסבונה עיר הגדולה אשר במלכות פורטוגאלו במצות המלך ... והלכנו נעים ונדים בים ארבעה חדשי[ם] ... באה עלינו ספינה אחת של ויסקאיינוס ושבנו אותנו ואת ממונינו והוליכנו לעיר מאלקא הגדור לה אשר בספרד ... ועמדנו שם על הים שני חדשים אחרים על כרחנו עד שהרשנונו ללכת אל מקום חפצנו. ומשם נסענו להלוך אל הברבריאה ... ואחר כך זכיתי ובאתי למלכות נאפוליש אחר כמה גלגולים וצרות רבו מספור וגם שם לא שלותי ולא שקטתי ויבא רגז של מלך צרפת וגם שם בשביה הכוני פצעוני נשאו את רדידי מעלי וכל מה שהיה לי

46 Arturo Farinelli, *Marrano (Storia di un vituperio)* (Geneva: Leo S. Olschki, 1925): 43ff. On the meaning of the term *marrano* in Italy, see also Ruiz Martín, "La expulsión," 32–35. The confusion between Spanish Jews and Spanish conversos is particularly evident in Machiavelli's *The Prince* when referring to the expulsion from Spain: "Oltre a questo, per potere intraprendere maggiore imprese, servandosi sempre della religione si volse a una pietosa crudeltà, cacciando e spogliando el suo regno de' Marrani: né può essere questo esempio più miserabile né più raro" (Niccolò Machiavelli, "Il Principe," ed. Mario Bonfantini, in *La letteratura italiana: Storia e testi*, 72 vols., ed. R. Mattoli et al. [Milan and Naples: Riccardo Ricciardi, 1954], 29:72. For an English translation, see Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, translated and edited by William Connel [Boston: Bedford St. Martins, 2005], 109).

47 "Et è da saper che questi marani sono zente baptizata, tamen li soi furon zudei, et stavano nel paese dil serenissimo Re di Spagna, e tenivano quadammodo un'altra leze, media tra la hebraica et christiana: pur dimostrarono esser boni christiani *publice*, et *privatim* tenivano le sinagoge in casa. Ma parse a questo glorioxo Re et Regina di Spagna, di cazzarli tutti dil paese, zoè quelli che non volevano lassar la vita loro teniva, et fece molti inquisitori frati per tutti li soi regni, con grande auctorità, et uno sopra tutti chiamato l'inquisitor major, i quali facevano la inchiesta, et molti marani fono brusati, altri fuziteno in diverse parte dil mondo ..." (Sanuto, *La spedizione*, 172–73).

According to Sanuto, other than the arrival of the refugees in Naples, a major cause for popular hatred of the Jews (and possibly *marrani* as well) was their involvement in financial dealings: moneylending and the operation of pawnshops. Therefore, in an attempt to placate the people, King Ferrando ordered the return of pawned items and cancelled the repayment of loans even when the terms were legally binding (see example above). But these measures, instead of calming the atmosphere, sparked further riots that spread throughout the kingdom.

Another contemporary source, the chronicle of Antonello Coniger, which is mainly concerned with events that occurred in Lecce and Apulia, also supplies information on the anti-Jewish riot in Naples. Other than providing a different date for the beginning of the riot—16 February—Coniger's account agrees with that of Notar Giacomo:

On 16 February the Neapolitans rose up in violence and robbed the Giudeca (the Jewish quarter⁴⁸) and all the places where the Jews lived, and worse, they sacked the Castle of Capuana, the royal stables, the arsenal, and the treasures of the House of Aragon. Upon seeing that, King Ferrante II and Don Federico [his son and heir] came riding on their horses to face the Neapolitans and pleaded with them to have pity on the innocent, claiming that even though the [king's] father [King Alfonso II who abdicated] had offended them, they intended to make amends. But these words convinced only a few.⁴⁹

Coniger's narrative provides an explanation of the chronology of the events (although he sometimes errs as to the exact dates). At first confined to the city of Naples, further riots broke out only after King Charles VIII's triumphal entrance to that city. Coniger dates his triumphal entry to 21 February, anticipating

48 The Jews of Naples were not confined to a ghetto, nor was there a well-defined Giudeca or Jewish quarter. During the fifteenth century, under the favorable rule of the Aragonese dynasty, there were several concentrations of Jews in Naples: the Via Giudeca Grande, the Giudechella a Vico Sinoca (the small Giudeca in the street of the synagogue), and another Giudechella was founded in 1492 after the arrival of the exiles from Spain and Sicily. See Giancarlo Lacerenza, "La topografia storica delle giudecche di Napoli nei secoli X–XVI," *Materia Giudaica* 11 (2006): 113–42.

49 "Die 16 Februarii Neapolitani se levaro a remore et saccheggiaro la Judeca, et in omne loco dove habitavano Judei, et peggio, che saccheggiaro tutto lo Castello di Capovana (=Capuana), la Cavallarizza, et l'arsenaru, e donca era robba de Casa de Ragona. Vedendo questo Re Ferrante secondo, et Don Federico se fero a cavallo avanti Napoletani pregandoli, che havessero pietate d'esso innocente, che se suo padre l'haveva offeso, chisso era per restaurare tutti, ma poco jurava tali parole" (Coniger, *Cronache*, 30).

the correct date by one day only, as the French king actually entered Naples on 22 February and was then lodged in the Castle of Capuana. All sources agree that Charles encountered no opposition and, to quote Coniger, he won *senza spezzare colpo di lancia* (without wasting the blow of a lance). In the space of a few days Charles VIII captured all the fortresses and all castles raised his flag. The people swore to obey him. To commemorate his victory he had the gates of the royal residence of Castel Nuovo dismantled and sent to Paris.

A few days later, news of Charles's conquest of Naples reached Lecce and this, according to Coniger, triggered the attack on the Jews:

On 26 February, as rumors that the king of France had taken Naples reached Lecce, the entire populace rose up in arms and after sacking the castle where most of the Jews had taken refuge with their goods, they sacked the entire Giudeca. [Although] they had swords [in hand] no one died and the looting continued for some time,⁵⁰ as they kept finding hidden money and valuables. On 12 March all the people of Lecce rioted, shouting "death, death⁵¹ to the Jews unless they become Christians" and thus a great number of them became Christians. And they [the people] furiously dragged the Bishop of Lecce [Marc Antonio Tolomei⁵²] and brought him to the square on the same day in order to consecrate the Jewish synagogue as a church to Santa Maria della Gratia,⁵³ bringing two thousand⁵⁴ figures of saints to celebrate Mass.⁵⁵

50 The word used here is *torni* (see note 55 below). In Italian *torno* (pl. *torni*) can refer to "giro, torno di tempo, attorno a quel tempo," translated as a period of time, at that time. See *Vocabolario della lingua italiana*, ed. Nicola Zingarelli (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1997). But this could be a misprint of the word "*iorni*," days.

51 According to Coniger's chronicle, the crowd cried "mojarono, mojarono," a dialectical form of the Italian verb "morire," literally meaning "they should die."

52 Bishop of Lecce from 1485 to 1498.

53 Modern scholarship identifies the church as Santa Maria Annunziata, not Santa Maria della Grazia. For this suggestion, see Cesare Colafemmina, "La Sinagoga rinascimentale di Lecce: una scoperta," in *Ebrei e Cristiani in Puglia e altrove: Vicende e problemi* (Cassano Murge: Messaggi, 2001, 112) (originally published in *La Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno*, 29 May 1994).

54 The number of saints seems exaggerated, but it is so in the original.

55 "Die 26 di febraro essendo in Lecce fama ch'el Re di Francia habia pilliato Napoli, se levò armata mano tutto lo populo, et saccheggiaro tutto il Castello dove erano andati la maggior parte de judei culloru facultate per essere salvi saccheggiando dopo tutto lo resto della judeca dove in tente spate non ci fo morto nullo et durò parecchi torni lo saccheggiamento, sempre trovando robba et denari sotterrati. Die 12 Marsio se levò in romore tutto lo populo di Lecce gridando mojarono mojarono tutti li Judei hover se facciano xpianani dove una gran quantità sende fero xpiani [=cristiani], et pilliaro cum gran furia lo

According to this narrative, the people of Lecce acted of their own accord. But was the attack on the Jews an extension of the general looting (as happened in Naples), or was it directed at them specifically? Were the townspeople induced to action by the realization that, once the Aragonese had been defeated, the Jews were no longer under royal protection? In any event, as happened elsewhere in similar situations, the Jews tried to seek refuge in the fortified castle. Unfortunately, as was the case during the Shepherds' Crusade,⁵⁶ or the riots of 1391 in Castile and Aragon,⁵⁷ the city castle did not offer the hoped-for security, and the mob overran, looted, and sacked the palace.

Benedetta de Balmes, daughter of a prominent Jewish family of Lecce,⁵⁸ provides an eyewitness account of these events. In a complaint addressed to King Federico after the restoration of the Aragonese dynasty, she describes the circumstances that caused her to appeal to a Christian acquaintance when the townspeople breached the castle of Lecce. Benedetta's story is quoted by Ferorelli, and because the latter relied on a document that is now lost, we only have partial testimony.⁵⁹

As she [Benedetta] was a widow, having no male [relative] to sustain her, she believed she was safe [in the castle] ... until one day [26 February?] the castle gate was opened and the townspeople entered with looting in mind, and she, lacking any kind of help or favor, saw Joanpaolo de Guarino, whom she knew, having done him many services and knowing him as a friend. And she saw a brother of his, and so she took him aside and entrusted him with a parcel in which there was a quantity of gold, silver, pearls, and other jewels worth between four and five hundred ducats, pleading with him to keep it for her in the greatest confidence.

Later, the nobleman Joanpaolo de Guarino refused to return the goods and in 1497 Benedetta appealed to the king. Benedetta's account sheds light on the sequence of events. The Jews first sought help from Christian neighbors; then,

Episcopo di Lecce portandolo di mezzo la piazza a consacrare la sinagoga delli judei dove in ditto jorno li fo miso de Santa Maria della gratia, et portato do mille figure de Santi, et celebrato messe" (Coniger, *Chronache*, 31).

56 Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence*, 73–78.

57 Jose Hinojosa Montalvo, *The Jews of the Kingdom of Valencia: From the Persecution to Expulsion, 1391–1492* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1993), 337.

58 Abraham de Balmes was King Ferrante's personal physician from 1472 until his death in 1489. Appointment: Colafemmina, *Puglia*, 31–32. Date of Balmes's death: NSA, *Sommaria, Partium* 31, fol. 48r; Colafemmina, *Puglia*, 73. See also note 37 above.

59 NSA, *Cancellaria Aragonese, Part.*, 7, fol. 3, quoted in Ferorelli, *Gli ebrei*, 200–201, 265–66.

the commune (*università*), or rather the city governing body, ordered the Jews to take their goods and go to the castle for their safety. It should be pointed out that this demonstrates, as do most Italian narratives, that it was mainly commoners who carried out the anti-Jewish attacks, and that the governing body of the city and the elites tried to prevent anti-Jewish violence. It is interesting to note that, at this stage, no one was killed and no one was forced to convert. Coniger stresses this fact and comments that even when the rioters were looting the Giudeca with swords in hand, they did not kill anyone.

But a few weeks later, on 12 March, another riot broke out. This time the Jews of Lecce were forced to choose between death and conversion. It is unclear what brought this change in the crowds' mood or how looting and sacking turned into religious zeal. No preacher is mentioned in Coniger's account. The official church was in fact so reluctant to involve itself that the people had to drag the bishop to the square in order to make him consecrate the synagogue and turn it into a church; it was clearly not the prelate's initiative.

The riots and mass conversion at Lecce follow known patterns: a political-military crisis brings disruption of the central government in its wake, and the people, that is, the lower classes, riot and attack the Jews. Looting is also part of the usual pattern as is the initial attempt of the local government to protect the Jews by offering them shelter in the fortified castle, as seen from Benedetta's actions. But her mention of Joanpaolo de Guarino, whom she knew well, shows that the attackers were indeed locals, not strangers. Attempts to save property by entrusting it to Christians are also mentioned in the chronicle of Elijah Capsali, which is one of the better-informed Jewish Hebrew sources on the kingdom of Naples: "and in those days the Jews entrusted their property to the gentiles in order to save it from the robbers' wicked hands, but when the Jews returned and asked for it, the gentiles denied everything and refused them."⁶⁰ Coniger's narrative reveals that some of the Jews stayed with Christians in order to avoid the rioters,⁶¹ but essentially to no avail. According to Coniger, the riots of Lecce ended with the conversion of most of the city's Jews.

For other places in the Kingdom of Naples we lack such detailed descriptions of the events. Nevertheless, several sources mention the conversion of exiled Sicilian Jews in Calabria, in the city of Naples, and in Apulia. A Sicilian labor contract from 1496 provides some information as to the circumstances that led

60 "בימים ההם הפקידו היהודים נכסיהם בידי הגוים למען לא ישלחו השוללי [ם] בעולתה ידיהם, Capsali, *Seder Eliyahu Zuta*, 219.

61 "Essendo tutti judei reposti in casa de xpiani [=christiani] per paura non essere amazzati" (Coniger, *Cronache*, 31).

to the conversion of a Jewish woman, formerly from Palermo. Her story is told by the Sicilian nobleman Yani de Cusencio, who acted as her representative:

[Yani de Cusencio] told Dominica's story, saying that while she was still [living] in the Jewish perfidy, she had been captured by enemies in the kingdom of Naples, in the province of Calabria. And as she was being detained by the enemies, because she feared for her life, so that, as she said, it pleased God that she be newly baptized.⁶²

Dominica was ransomed by Yani de Cusencio who later brought her to Randazzo, in eastern Sicily; there the nobleman retrieved the ransom money by selling her as a servant to a local family. Her labor contract stipulated that she was to remain in service until the entire sum was paid. However, the enemies who forced her to convert remain unidentified. It is likely that Dominica fell into the hands of French soldiers, but it is also possible that she was taken by local Christians.

More information about the forced conversion of Sicilian immigrants comes from the responsa of the Sicilian rabbi Ḥayyim ben Shabbetai Yona. Yona was a disciple of R. Judah Minz of Padua, and later in life, also of Don Isaac Abravanel.⁶³ Circa 1497, while in Trani, R. Ḥayyim was asked to rule on the validity of a marriage contracted in that city some two years earlier by Elia, son of Shabbetai Demmensi. Shabbetai Demmensi, his son Elia, and his two sons-in-law—Moses Taguil and Menaḥem Actun⁶⁴—were all converted in Naples

62 "Yani de Cusencio eius procuratoris ... narrando dixit cum sit quod existens ipsa Dominica in Iudayca perfidia fuit capta ab inimicis in regno Neapolis in partibus Calabrie et fuerat et erat detempta ab inimicis ad eo quod de vita periculabat et pro ut dicto placuit Deo novens se batizari" (Catania, state archive, section Notai de Randazzo, Ms. Notary Nicolo de Panhormo, reg. 24, fols. 39v–40v [dated 26 September 1496]). See Zeldes, *The Former Jews of This Kingdom: Sicilian Converts after the Expulsion, 1492–1516* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 121–22.

63 The responsa of R. Ḥayyim ben Shabbetai Yona are at present preserved only in manuscript form: Biblioteca Medicea Laurentiana, Plut. 88.47 (microfilm number F 17971 at the Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts). On Rabbi Yona the Sicilian, see Avraham David, "Don Isaac Abravanel and his Family in South Italy in the Last Decade of the Fifteenth Century and the Early Sixteenth Century" (in Hebrew), *Hispania Judaica Bulletin* 8 (2011): 36–48.

64 Responsum: "And in those days [Judges 18:1], two years ago, some Hebrew men who were converted to Christianity in Naples when the king of France came, came here to Trani; and the man's name is Shabbetai Demmensi and his son's name Elia and his two sons in law, the husbands of his daughters, the one is Moses Tawil and the other Menaḥem Atun. And they remained in Trani for some time, living as Jews as before, because the gentiles did not know that they had converted, and they observed the Law. But they did not stay

during the French occupation of the city. According to the responsum, Shabbetai's family left Naples and came to Trani where they lived as Jews for a short time, hiding their conversion from the local Christians. But then, still fearing the gentiles, they left Trani for Barletta. Fearing discovery and branding as apostates there also, they left Italy altogether for Valona (Vlorë, now in Albania), then an Ottoman port. Then Elia died in Valona. This story demonstrates how the exiles fared during the French occupation. In this case it was clearly the French who forced them to convert, rather than local crowds. They tried to revert to Judaism in a place they would not be well known, fleeing Naples for the province of Apulia. But even there they feared discovery. Bearing in mind that at the time there was no effective Inquisition in the kingdom of Naples, it is likely that they felt threatened by local populace, or perhaps by the local clergy.

Whereas this particular family chose to emigrate, others probably stayed put and lived as New Christians. Such was the case of Bernardo Russu of Seminara in Calabria, a Sicilian Jew who had converted to Christianity. In July 1495, at a time when order was being restored throughout the kingdom of Naples, Russu asked the Sicilian authorities to return the property he had sent to Messina in order to save it from the French.⁶⁵ The Sicilian officials in charge of Jewish

in Trani for long because this [their conversion] became known and they went to Barletta and stayed there for a few days, and they left for Valona because in Barletta they were seized with fright [Psalms 14:5] that other gods possessed them [Isaiah 26:13]. Sometime later, Elia died in Valona" (יהי בימים ההם זה שנתיים ימים באו אנשים עברים אשר נשת" (מדו בנאפולי בבא מלך צרפת איש וביתו באו הנה טראני וזה שמו אשר יקרא שבתי דמנשי ושם בנו אליה ושם שני חתניו לוקחי בנותיו שם האחד משה טויל ושם האחר מנחם עטון וישבו בטראני ימים במספר מחזיקים בדת היהודים כאשר בהתחלה כי לא נודע לגויים אשר סביבותיו כי המירו דתם ויחזיקו בתורתם ולא האריכו ימים לשבת בטראני כי נודע הדבר וילכו לברליטא וישבו שם ימים אחדים וילכו להם בלאבילונא כי שם בברליטה פחדו פחד כי (אלים אחרים בעולם; אחר הדברים האלה מת אליה הנו[כר] בלאבילונא Biblioteca Medicea Laurentiana, Plut. 88.47, fol. 24r–24v. The surnames of the protagonists of this responsum are typically Sicilian. Tawil, spelled in Sicilian documents Taguil, is a common surname of Jewish families from all over Sicily, and so is Atun usually spelled Actuni, Actano, Actono, etc. The Hebrew surname Diminshi (or Demmensi in the Latinized form) is also Sicilian but very rare. It probably indicates that the family originated from Demmena, identified by modern scholars as San Marco d'Alunzio in eastern Sicily. See Cesare Colafemmina, "Un copista ebreo a Demmena nel 1472," *Gli ebrei in Sicilia dal tardoantico al medioevo: Studi in onore di Monsignor Benedetto Rocco*, ed. Nicolo Bucaria (Palermo: F. Flaccovio, 1998), 89–98. See also Shelomo Simonsohn, *The Jews in Sicily*, 18 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 18:12413–21 (Geographical Index).

65 The Sicilian document states that Bernardo Russu sent the property to Messina "because of his fear of the French who were having the run of the land" (*per timuri di li francisci chi cursiro la dicta terra*) (Palermo, State Archive, Ms. Conservatoria di registro, reg. 874, fol. 40r [17 July 1495]).

property first ascertained that he indeed had been baptized in Seminara, apparently under the patronage of a local nobleman, Esau Russu, Baron of Bagnara. Bernardo's brother, however, remained a Jew, and therefore his portion of the property in question was deducted from the total and reserved for the Sicilian treasury.⁶⁶ Bernardo's story provides several important clues to the conversions of 1495. The reference to the patronage of the Baron of Bagnara reveals the involvement of local nobles who perhaps offered protection to those who chose to convert. Fear of the French was undoubtedly one of the leading causes of conversion but, as can be inferred from Bernardo's petition, some converted in order to save their property rather than their lives. Lastly, as happened in other cases, not all family members converted: Bernardo's brother remained a Jew. The responsum of R. Ḥayyim Ben Shabbetai Yona (quoted above) implies that Mazal Tov, the woman who was betrothed or married to Elia Demmensi, did not convert. Another Sicilian exile, Donato Canet, converted to Christianity, taking the name Pietro de Bologna, while his brother Crixì Canet remained a Jew.⁶⁷ Mosè de Balmes, son of the physician Abraham de Balmes, converted to Christianity while his sister remained a Jew.⁶⁸ There are many such examples where families split into Christians and Jews in the aftermath of the conversions. In 1498 the Jews of the kingdom of Naples petitioned King Federico (after the restoration of the Aragonese dynasty) to compel new converts to Christianity to divorce their Jewish wives.⁶⁹

A number of Hebrew sources mention the French invasion and the fear and the terror experienced by the Jews, but only a few explicitly refer to conversions.

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- 66 "As the said Bernardo has been baptized and has become a Christian, according to the petition addressed to us, we ... order you to return to Bernardo all the clothes and property, except certain silver which was included in the inventory which belonged to his brother, the Jew, and this would be given to the treasury and he will be given a receipt for it ..." (*lu dictu Bernardu havirisi bactizato et essiri christiano, ad supplicacioni a nui di zo facta, havimo provisto et per la presenti vi dichimo et comandamo digiati a lo dicto Bernardo restituirì et dari tucti soi robbi di vestiri et altri cosi contenti in ipso inventario, si era di so fratri, iudei, lo quali argento tamen certo argento contento in ipso inventario, si era di so fratri, iudei, lo quali argento dinirili nomine regie curie recuperando la presenti cum apoca de restituto*) (Palermo, State Archive, Ms. Conservatoria di registro, reg. 874, fol. 40r [17 July 1495]; see note 65, above).
- 67 On the brothers Canet in Calabria, see Colafemmina, *Calabria*, 428. On the convert Pietro de Bologna (formerly Donato Canet), see Zeldes, *Former Jews*, 38, 184, 228.
- 68 NSA, Sommaria, Partium 42, fol. 1r; Colafemmina, *Puglia*, 181–82.
- 69 "Because many Jews were baptized and their wives remained in the Jewish faith, we beg your majesty to order these New Christians to divorce their wives ..." (Biagio Ferrante, "Gli statuti di Federico d'Aragona per gli ebrei del regno," *Archivio Storico per le Province Napoletane* 97 (1979): 131–84; the text of the statutes has been re-published by Cesare Colafemmina, *Gli ebrei a Taranto: Fonti documentarie* (Bari: Società di storia patria per la Puglia, 2005): 149–61 (154).

An anonymous Hebrew chronicle describes Charles VIII's invasion of Italy and the conquest of the kingdom of Naples, lamenting the destruction of Jewish communities throughout the kingdom:

And there were great congregations in Naples and the nearby towns, and in the provinces of Apulia and Calabria, and most of them were lost on account of our sins “and those destined for the sword, to the sword, those destined for captivity, to captivity” (Jeremiah 43:11) and those destined for leaving the fold, to leave the fold [to convert]. And that was because the French pillaged and destroyed them, and many were converted for fear of the French, even though the king of the French did not wish the Jews to be harmed, and he protected them whenever he entered the cities. And the [local] crowds too lost their fear of the king of Naples's government, and they stood up against the Jews to despoil them and force them to convert, and it was a time of trouble for the Jews in the provinces where they took refuge in their exile, and many thousands were lost and old communities were destroyed in the provinces of Apulia and Calabria.⁷⁰

This narrative attributes most acts of robbery and forced conversions to the French, but does not omit the part played by the local townspeople (the crowds, *zibburim*—ציבורים in Hebrew). Its claim that Charles VIII attempted to protect the Jews is probably historically accurate, as it is confirmed by other sources. According to Marino Sanuto, the French monarch initially tried to protect the Jews: “and as the king [Charles VIII] entered [Naples] he published an edict ordering that no harm shall be done to the Jews.” But this well-intentioned policy was short-lived and later Charles VIII chose to avoid confrontation with his troops on account of the Jews, and made no effort to restrain them, as Sanuto comments: “later he [King Charles] tolerated all the damage that had been done to them.”⁷¹ Don Isaac Abravanel, who was in Naples until the French invasion and knew of the Jews' sufferings, states in his introduction to his commentary on Deuteronomy:

... and the Lord will whistle to the fly (Isaiah 7:18), the king of France who destroyed us ... conquered the land ... Every man did as he pleased (Judges 17: 6), the Lord's community was like sheep that have

70 Parma, Ms. Biblioteca Palatina, Cod. Parm. 2420; Marx, “Expulsion of the Jews,” 87, 97–98. The English translation is Marx's.

71 “Et el Re, intrato che'l fu, fece uno editto non fusse dato impazo a Zudei, tamen poi comportò ogni danno li fo fatto” (Sanuto, *La Spedizione*, 241).

no shepherd (Numbers 27:17), and many of the people of the land professed to be Jews for the fear that had fallen upon them (paraphrase of Esther 8:17) for dread they transgressed teachings, violated laws (paraphrase of Isaiah 24:5) ...⁷²

The final sentence about the people professing to be Jews should be understood to mean exactly the opposite, namely that *the Jews* were professing to be *Christians* out of fear.

Another Sephardic Jew, Isaac bar Abraham ben Khalilia, wrote the following in his colophon at the end of the copy he made of Nicolaus Praepositus's *Antidotarium*:⁷³

[The copying of this work] was completed here in the city of Sora⁷⁴ at the edge of the kingdom of Naples, at the beginning of the rule of the abomination on the 33rd [day] of the Counting of the Omer⁷⁵ in the year 5255.⁷⁶

The conversion of the Hebrew date to that of the Common Era turns out to be 21 May 1495. Although the term “abomination” (תועבה) used by the copyist does not usually figure among the Hebrew terms applied to conversion, it is still associated with idolatry in the Bible and medieval Hebrew writings.⁷⁷ In my view, there is little doubt that the colophon refers to the forced conversions

72 “כי שרק ה' לזבוב מלך צרפת אשר כלנו ... ויעלו על הארץ ויכבשוה ... איש הישר בעיניו יעשה והיתה עדת ה' כצאן אשר אין להם רועה. ורבים מעמי הארץ המתיהדים מאמות מות, ...” Isaac Abravanel, *Peyrush ha-Torah le-Rabbenu Yisḥaq 'Abravanel: Devarim* [Commentary on the Torah: Deuteronomy], ed. Avishay Shotland (Jerusalem: Horev, 1999), introduction.

73 A compilation on pharmacology by Nicolaus Praepositus of Salerno (ca. 1140).

74 Sora, a town in Lazio, on the northern frontier of the kingdom of Naples.

75 Counting of the Omer (in Hebrew: *Sefirat ha-Omer*), is the counting of the forty-nine days between Passover and Shavuot. The Counting of the Omer begins on the second day of Passover (16 Nisan) and continues into the month of Iyyar. The thirty-third day is *Lag ba-Omer*, a Jewish holiday, which occurs on the 18th day of the Hebrew month of Iyyar. The Jewish year [5]255 corresponds to 1495.

76 Oxford, Bodleian Library, Ms. Heb. e. 154 (microfilm F 24777 at the Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts): “נשלם פה העירה סורה אשר בקצה מלכות נפולי ותחלת התועבה”: “שלטנות ביום ל”ג לעמר משנת ר”ה”

77 “You shall consign the images of their gods to the fire ... you must not bring an abhorrent thing into your house, or you will be proscribed like it; you must reject it as abomination ...” (Deuteronomy 7: 25–26); “has raised his eyes to the fetishes, has committed abomination” (Ezekiel, 18:12). The term “House of Abomination” for a church appears in Solomon ibn Verga's *Shevet Yehudah* as following: “stole from them an image from the house of abomination” (מהם גנב צלם אחד של כסף מבית תועבות) Solomon ibn Verga, *Shevet Yehudah*, ed. Azriel Shohat (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1947), 162.

that took place in the kingdom of Naples during this period. The uprising against the Jews started in February 1495 and conversions took place all over the kingdom during the winter months. Moreover, one of the worst outbursts occurred in Lecce on the 12 March 1495, so it stands to reason that, when he wrote in May 1495, the author knew about the forced conversions and applied the word “abomination” (תועבה) to these events.

Most Hebrew and non-Jewish sources mention the terror inspired by the French soldiers, whereas fear of the local mobs figures in only a minority, notably in Coniger’s chronicle. Coniger describes the conversion of the Jews of Lecce as having been accompanied by the threat of death. His is also the only source that describes an incident in which Jews chose death over conversion: “on the evil and perfidious Jews it so happens that I have to tell you about a horrible incident” (*de Malinghi et perfiti Judei me accade narrarvi uno orribil caso*), and goes on to say that on the day the cry “death to Jews unless they become Christians” was heard in Lecce, a family of Spanish Jews, numbering five persons, including women and children, threw themselves into a well so as not to be forced to convert to Christianity. The last to jump into the well was the father but the son tried to drown him in order to save himself, and then the father took a knife he kept next to his body and killed the son. The people of the house, that is, the Christians, ran out when they heard the shouts and dragged out the living father and the other four dead ones.⁷⁸ As far as we know, this is the only documented case of Jews attempting to choose death over conversion in 1495. The struggle between father and son lends the entire episode a grotesque aspect but at the same time turns it into an all-too-human tragedy. It is important, however, to draw attention to the fact that this narrative was penned by a hostile author, who sought to underscore the absurdity and futility of the Jews’ actions.

But if there had truly been many martyrs, it is likely that Hebrew sources would have extolled them, or at least mentioned their fates. The story of the Sicilian Jews found in the responsum of R. Ḥayyim Shabbetai Yona is

78 “certi Judei spangoli stando in casa de uno Zentilomo nomine Pierri Sambiasi in quel dì, che se levò le grida moirano li Judei, ho se fazzano Christiani, questi tali che erano cinque fra mascoli e femine tutti se jettaro dentro un puzzo per non se fare Xpiani, [=christiani] el marito d’una di quelle che fo il quatro che se jettò dentro il pozo trovò la moliere, e due altri che surgeano nel cadire suo, e non soffondau nell’acqua dove havendose pentito se recuperò alli gradi del puccio el quinto che era suo figlio se jectau l’ultimo cascando ... [here some words are missing in the published version] sopra il predetto tutti dui andara in acqua el Padre se recuperò, el figliolo havia acceccato il Pdre per non morire, e l’Judeo arrecordandose d’un cortello che havia adosso donò la morte al filio per campare esso, quelli della casa subito corsero al rumore cacciarande l’Padre vivo e li quatro morti,” Coniger, *Cronache*: 31–32.

probably more representative of the reaction of those who could not reconcile themselves to conversion. Thus, the family of Shabbetai Demmensi left the town where they converted as soon as possible after the fact and tried to return to Judaism elsewhere, moving from city to city until they found refuge in Ottoman Valona. Ḥayyat too left South Italy and settled in Mantua. Thus, it appears that leaving the land of persecution was a viable, albeit not an easy, option.

The exact number of Jews that converted in 1495 remains unknown and, given the paucity of data, it is impossible to even arrive at an estimate. However, contemporary sources attest to the formation of a large population of New Christians (*cristiani novelli*) in the aftermath of the French occupation. The concessions obtained by the Jews from King Federico II in 1498 make reference to the converts as “the New Christians who converted since the coming of the French to this place [i.e. the kingdom of Naples]” (*li Cristiani novelli baptizati dala venuta deli Francesi in qua*.)” One of the demands made by the Jews in these concessions was that the king should order converts to grant bills of divorce to their Jewish wives.⁷⁹ The next significant reference to the presence of large numbers of new converts comes from a letter by Gonsalvo Fernández de Aguilar de Córdoba (the *Gran Capitán*), who became the first Spanish viceroy of Naples, addressed to the Catholic monarchs. In this letter, written in response to an order to expel the Jews, the *Gran Capitán* argues that

although there are few overt Jews (*judíos de señal*) in the kingdom [of Naples], there are many who still are [Jews] in essence, because all of them had been forced to become Christians when King Charles [of France] came to this kingdom and they call themselves baptized Jews.⁸⁰

79 Granting bills of divorce: “as many Jews have been baptized while their wives remained in the Jewish faith, they are petitioning Your Majesty to order the said New Christians to grant bills of divorce to their wives” (*Item perché multi Iudei se sonno baptizati, et le mogliere sonno restate in la loro fede iudayca, supplicano Vostra Maiestà se digne ordinare che dicti Crystiani novelli habiano da dare repudio a loro mogliere ...*) (Ferrante, “Gli statuti,” 131–84, and Colafemmina, *Gli ebrei a Taranto*, 149–61). See also Ferorelli, *Gli ebrei*, 195, 200–206.

80 New York, Jewish Theological Seminary, MS NH 23. On the appointment of the *Gran Capitán* as viceroy of Naples and the politics of this period, see Belenguer, *Ferdinando e Isabella*, 292–302; Carlos J. Hernando Sánchez, “El *Gran Capitán* y los inicios del virreinato de Napoles: Nobleza y estado en la expansión europea de la monarquía bajo los reyes católicos,” in *El Tratado de Tordesillas y su época*, ed. Luis Antonio Ribot García, Adolfo Carrasco Martínez, Luis Adao da Fonseca, 3 vols. (Madrid: Junta de Castilla y León, 1995), 3:1817–54. On the attempts to introduce a Spanish-style Inquisition in the Kingdom of

Or in other words, by the time the letter was written (6 July 1504), the small number of Jews remaining did not warrant their expulsion but, because there were many suspect converts who still regarded themselves as Jews, the Spanish Inquisition should be brought to Naples to investigate them. Later, after failing to establish a Spanish-style Inquisition in Naples, King Ferdinand the Catholic ordered the expulsion of the New Christians from the kingdom in 1510.⁸¹ Interestingly, both sources quoted above attribute the conversions to the French or at least associate them with their rule. Neither mentions the acts of the local population. The letter of the Gran Capitán, however, demonstrates that suspicion and rejection of the newly converted, a process that in the Spanish kingdoms took more than a generation to develop, took place in the Kingdom of Naples in less than a decade. Fifteen years after the mass conversions, the New Christians were ordered to leave. Although of relatively short duration, the history of the converts of 1495 is not insignificant. On the one hand, it sheds light on a relatively little-known chapter connected to the expulsions from the Spanish kingdoms, Sicily, and Portugal, and on the other, a careful examination of the events is instrumental for comparison with other mass conversions in Christendom.

4 Comparisons and Conclusions

Although many sources describing the events of 1495 attribute the conversions to the French, there is no indication that they were ordered or encouraged by King Charles VIII of France. At most, the French king did too little to prevent acts of violence committed by either his own soldiery or the local inhabitants. Pressure to convert came from below, exerted by popular elements, whether local or French. Although no massacres are reported, violence and the threat of violence are present in all the extant narratives and therefore fear of death was likely a deciding factor in the resulting conversions.

Naples, see Luigi Amabile, *Il Santo Ufficio della inquisizione in Napoli* (Città di Castello: S. Lapi, 1892; reprint Soveria Mannelli, 1987).

81 On the expulsion of 1510, see Cesare Colafemmina, "1510, Novembre 21: le prammatiche di espulsione degli Enrei e dei Neofiti dal regno dio Napoli," *Sefer Yuhasin* 26 (2010): 1–21. See also Nadia Zeldes, "There is No Greater Liberty than That Given to Them by the King of Spain' ... Jewish Converts to Christianity in the Aftermath of the Expulsion of 1510 according to Rabbinic Responsa," in *1510/2010 Cinquecentenario dell'espulsione degli ebrei dall'Italia meridionale: Atti del convegno internazionale, Napoli, Università "l'Orientale" 22–23 novembre 2010*, ed. Giancarlo Lacerenza (Naples: Università degli studi di Napoli L'Orientale, 2013), 57–66.

Despite the absence of reported massacres, many features of the events of 1495 are comparable with the riots of 1391 in the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon. In a recently published article, Benjamin Gampel has drawn the attention to several crucial questions raised by the riots of 1391 in the Aragonese territories, arguing that none of the reasons given by modern scholars fully explains their virulence, rapid spread, and the resulting conversions.⁸² According to Gampel, the behavior of the Jews' protectors and their failure to act contributed to the proliferation and success of the riots. This argument is valid to some extent for all mass conversions which were brought about by popular pressure, or by groups acting in contravention of the traditional frameworks that regulated the status of the Jews in Christian Europe. Princes, bishops, and town elites failed to protect the Rhineland Jewish communities during the First Crusade when confronted by crusading bands or town mobs; it was the lack of effective rule in Castile during the minority of King Henry II, and the weakness of King John I of Aragon, that failed to protect the Spanish Jewish communities against the rioters of 1391.⁸³ It can similarly be argued that the lack of government in the kingdom of Naples facilitated the spread and violence of the 1495 riots. Even before the fall of the Aragonese dynasty, Ferrante's successors were unable, or unwilling, to protect the Jews. After the victory of King Charles VIII, the Jews' fate depended on the French monarch's decisions. But Charles's policy regarding the Jews was inconsistent. According to Sanuto, King Charles issued an edict prohibiting any injury to the Jews. But even if he initially intended to protect them, he took no action to enforce his orders and did not punish the perpetrators of violence. Charles's inconsistency is demonstrable also in regard to his attitude towards the *marrani* (converted Jews, or Jews coming from the Iberian peninsula). At first Charles permitted the return of the *marrani* who had been expelled by King Ferrando (Ferrante II) and offered them safeguards, but afterwards he broke his promise and demanded that they pay him twelve thousand ducats.⁸⁴ But were his vacillation and complacent attitude towards the rioters motivated by anti-Semitism or sincere

82 Benjamin Gampel, "Unless the Lord Watches Over the City ...': Joan of Aragon and His Jews, June–October 1391," in *New Perspectives on Jewish Christian Relations: In Honor of David Berger*, ed. Elisheva Carlebach and Jacob J. Schacter (Leiden: Brill, 2012): 65–89.

83 On the attacks against the Jews during the First Crusade, see Robert Chazan, *European Jewry and the First Crusade* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); for a general description of the events of 1391, see Baer, *History*, 2:95–110.

84 "Et el Re, intrato che'l fu, fece uno editto non fusse dato impazo a Zudei, tamen poi comportò ogni danno li fo fatto. Achora [fu] contento Marani ritornasse, et li dé salvo condotto, poi lo rumpete, et li retene, et manzò zerca ducati 12 milia" (Sanuto, *La spedizione*, 241).

support of forced conversions? Not necessarily. King Charles's failure to protect the Jews should be compared with his lack of interest in the sufferings of the local population in general. As the French army descended on the Italian Peninsula, Charles made no effort to protect local people from the ravages and depredations wrought by his soldiers. Many contemporary sources describe the cruelty of the French soldiers who spared no one, took no prisoners, and did not hesitate to destroy a church if it was in their way.⁸⁵ This assessment of the situation seems to confirm Gampel's argument for lack of effective royal protection as an important, if not crucial, element in the unfolding of events.

Another factor shared by all three of the aforementioned episodes of anti-Jewish violence is the attackers' acceptance of conversion as an alternative to putting the Jews to death. Chazan interprets both actions as attempts to eliminate the Jews either physically or spiritually. But even when violence was uppermost, and no real alternative was provided, conversion was still the preferred option. In describing the attack on the Jewry of Moers (in western Germany), Chazan remarks: "It is of course not surprising that the townspeople should have wished to avoid violence by bringing the Jews to baptism. What is striking is the willingness of the crusaders to allow the townspeople ample time and opportunity to convert these Jews."⁸⁶ And for the later events, it is worthwhile to compare the circumstances leading to the conversion of the Jews of Lecce when the townspeople cried: "mojarono mojarono tutti li Judei hover se facciano xpiani" (death, death to the Jews unless they become Christians) to similar words voiced a hundred years earlier by the rioters in Valencia: "Muyren los dits juheus o's facen christians."⁸⁷ Present in each of these events is the threat of death but also the alternative of conversion.

There are, however, important differences between the rioters' goals and the Jewish response in each case. The portrayal of the events of 1096 in the Jewish chronicles leaves little room for doubt that the intent was the complete annihilation of the Jews and that plunder was secondary, and modern historians tend to adopt this interpretation.⁸⁸ Whereas widespread conversion was the most striking result of the riots of 1391, there were massacres and manifestations of

85 Anne Denis, *Charles VIII et les Italiens: Histoire et Mythe* (Geneva: Droz, 1979), 89.

86 Chazan, *European Jewry*, 75.

87 For the riot at Lecce, see note 55 above. On the attack against the Jews of Valencia, see the letter of Infante Martí to King John I of Aragon (Barcelona, Archives of the Crown of Aragon, Cancillería Real, reg. 2.093, fols. 112r–v, published in Jaume Riera i Sans, "Los tumultos contra las juderías de la Corona de Aragón en 1391," *Cuadernos de Historia* 8 [1977]: 220.

88 Chazan, *European Jewry*, 68–71.

martyrdom and plunder.⁸⁹ There are many, varied explanations for the outbreak of the riots of 1391: some focus almost exclusively on theological and religious aspects; others stress the role of social and economic conditions in Castile and Aragon during the preceding period.⁹⁰ The outbreak of 1495 incorporates most of these elements. Enmity toward Jews because of their role as moneylenders, pawnbrokers, and competitors in a variety of economic enterprises was certainly an important factor, but this state of affairs was characteristic of Jewish existence almost everywhere during the medieval and early modern periods. Without assigning too much weight to the economic factor, note that, according to Sanuto, one of the demands of the rioters in Naples in January 1495 was the cancellation of loans and the return of pawned items. Many complaints addressed to the Sommaria between 1497 and 1498 after the restoration of the Aragonese dynasty mention the seizing of pawned objects, bankruptcy, and loss of property.⁹¹

Although it is difficult to assess the importance of religious factors in the outbreak of 1495, some religious aspects merit special attention. It is possible that the sermons of the Franciscan Roberto Caracciolo of Lecce prepared the way for the outbreak of violence in that city. A stronger case can be made for the so called prophesy of St. Cathaldus. Ferrante refused to consider it, but the fame of the prophecy spread far and wide, even worrying the pope (Alexander VI). The discovery of the book and the prophecy were certainly known in Neapolitan circles as Notar Giacomo reports:

On 8 April 1492 the book of St. Cathaldus was found in the city of Taranto by a deacon named Raphaele of St. Pietro della Porta. It was brought to his majesty the king. That St. Cathaldus was the archbishop of the city of Taranto and the book's covers were made of lead.

The same story appears in Coniger's chronicle.⁹²

89 On martyrdom during the attacks of 1391, see Ben Shalom, "Kiddush ha-Shem."

90 On religious aspects and anti-Semitism, see Baer, *History* 2:95–138; Ben Zion Netanyahu, *The Origins of the Inquisition in Fifteenth Century Spain* (New York: Random House, 1995), 127–67; Philip Wolff, "The 1391 Pogrom in Spain: Social Crisis or Not?" *Past and Present* 50 (1971): 4–18; Jaume Riera i Sans, "Els avalots del 1391 a Girona," in *Jornades d'història dels jueus a Catalunya* (Girona: L'Ajuntament de Girona, 1987), 95–159.

91 Alfonso Silvestri, *Il commercio a Salerno nella seconda metà del quattrocento* (Salerno: Camera di commercio, industria e agricoltura, 1952), 35 n. 2; Colafemmina, *Calabria*, 466.

92 "A di VIII de Aprile 1492 in la cita de Taranto fo trovato per uno iacono nomine Raphaele a Sancto Pietre della Porta lo libro de sancto Cathaldo quale fo portato alla Maesta del Signore Re: lo quale sancto Cathaldo fo Archiepiscopo della Cita de Taranto et le coperte del libro erano de piombo" (Notar Giacomo, *Cronica di Napoli*, 173; Coniger, *Cronache*, 27).

The French also knew of the prophecy as Philippe de Commines, ambassador and counselor to Charles VIII, attests:

For King Ferrand [Ferrante I], who was natural son to Alphonso the Great ... was highly concerned to see his kingdoms invaded by such a powerful army, and to find himself not in a position to oppose it ... And besides, in the pulling down of a chapel (as I have been assured by several of his nearest), there was a book found with the title, *Truth, with Its Secret Counsel*, which (it is said) contained a full prophecy of his misfortunes; but there were only three persons who had a glimpse of it, for as soon as he had read it, he committed it to the flames.⁹³

The French were probably happy to spread the story and it may have played a role in the outburst of hatred against the Jews, especially after the defeat of the Neapolitan forces and their failure to prevent the French invasion.

And yet, according to Sanuto, the first riot broke out in Naples in January 1495 while King Ferrando (Ferrante II) was still the reigning monarch and was sparked by the arrival of two ships carrying new Jewish immigrants. This incident, as well as other complaints addressed to the former king, Ferrante I, and the Sommaria, shows that there was widespread resentment against the arrival of at least twenty thousand Jews in the kingdom of Naples at that time. To date, no study on the effects of such a large wave of immigration on the Neapolitan economy and society has been undertaken, but there can be little doubt that both were affected to some extent.

The acts of robbery and violence committed by the French soldiery are not difficult to explain, as any invading army tended to pillage and destroy property. The soldiers targeted the Jews because they were a weaker element and because, as seen above, they did not enjoy local support. King Charles VIII could have, but did not, prevent such acts. However, whereas robbery, and even murder, can be understood as the unavoidable consequence of invasion, forced conversion is another matter. Charles VIII saw his invasion of Italy and

93 "Car le roy Ferrand, qui estoit filz bastard d'Alphonse ... porta grand passion ledict Ferrand en son cuer de veoir venir sur luy ceste armee et qu'i n'y pouvoit remedier ... Et si trouva ung livre, comme m'ont certiffié des plus prouchains de luy, qui fut trouvé en defaisant une chapelle, ou il y avoit escript dessus: Le voyr, avecques son conseil secret; et veult l'on dire qu'il contentoit tout le mal qui luy est advenu; et n'estoient que trois a le veoir, et puis le jetta au feu" (Philippe de Commines, *Mémoires*, ed. Joël Blanchard [Paris: Livre de Poche, 2001], chap. XIV, 538–39. For the English translation, see *The Memoirs of Philip de Commines, Lord of Argenton*, 2 vols. ed. Andrew R. Scoble (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1892), 1:154.

the conquest of Naples as a religious mission and holy crusade whose ultimate goal was the recovery of the Holy Land. Religious fervor was strong among the French troops. Before coming to Naples, the French soldiery attacked the Jews of Rome and burned down a synagogue in that city. This incident is related by André de la Vigne in his *Le Voyage de Naples*, a chronicle written in Old French that extols the triumphs of Charles VIII in Italy. The French chronicle gives the following account of an encounter between the French soldiery and the Jews of Rome:

And at that time a quarrel broke out in a street close to the Jewish quarter between the Jews and our soldiers who belonged to the French and Scottish guard; and so fierce it was and so well managed by the gallant and resolute French, that many Jews were killed then and there, as was one of their leaders who behaved too rashly. And after seizing their goods on the spot, they [the soldiers] totally destroyed their synagogue.⁹⁴

Christians and Jews alike interpreted the events of 1495 in messianic and apocalyptic terms.⁹⁵ The tensions of this time are reflected in the work of a Franciscan friar, Angelus Terzonis de Legonissa. Written in 1497, his *Opus Davidicum* extols the messianic destiny of the French king as a descendant of the house of David, thus making the house of France, rather than the Jews, the rightful heirs to the Davidic dynasty. But this author displays an ambivalent

94 "En celluy temps se leva une noise entre Juifz et noz gens de souldée tant de la garde francoyse qu'escossoyse, en une rue pres la place judee, et fut si grande et si tres bien fondée par les Francoys gours et esvertuez que maintz Juifz furent illec tueez, et ung de chefz de Judee trop rogue; avec leurs biens qu'on prist la situez, on destruisit toute leur synagogue" (André de la Vigne, *Le Voyage de Naples*, ed. Anna Slerca [Milan: Vita I Pensiero, 1981], 233. On the author, see the introduction to this edition. The assault of the Jewish quarter in Rome by the French soldiery is also mentioned by Andrés Bernáldez: "they committed many acts of robbery and assault, and put to the sack a great part of the Jewish quarter, where there were more than three thousand Jewish inhabitants" (*fizieron muchos robos e fuerças y muertes de ombres, e metieron a saco mano grand parte de la judería, donde avía más de tres mil vezinos judíos*), (*Memorias del reinado de los reyes católicos*, ed. Manuel Gomez Moreno and Juan de M. Carriazo [Madrid: Real Academia de la Historia, 1962], 347. On the incident in Rome, see also Abraham Berliner, *Geschichte der Juden in Rom* (Frankfurt am Main: J. Kauffmann, 1893; new edition: Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1987), 76.

95 Samuel Kraus, "Le roi de France Charles VIII et les espérances messianiques," *Revue des Études Juives* 51 (1906): 87–96; Amnon Linder, "L'expédition italienne de Charles VIII et les espérances messianiques des juifs: témoignage du manuscrit B. N. Lat. 5971 A," *Revue des Études Juives* 137 (1978): 179–86. On the motives of Charles VIII, see Abulafia, *Western Mediterranean Kingdoms*, 248–49.

attitude toward the Jews: on the one hand, he praises the house of France for “having extirpated and expelled all Jews and heretics not only from its borders, but also from within its realms”; on the other, he praises the Jews for recognizing Charles VIII as the “Messianic king” prophesied by the book of Daniel.⁹⁶ For the Jews too, Charles VIII represented the King of the North from the book of Daniel, but he was perceived as a harbinger of the end of days rather than a deliverer. According to kabbalistic writings, the sufferings caused by the French conquest of Naples were the birth pangs that would bring the Messiah. This particular interpretation of the events can be found in the colophon to a copy of *Sefer ha-Peliah* (Book of Wonder),⁹⁷ probably written in the early sixteenth century:

And I record here what I wrote in Rome on 26 Iyyar in the year 5255 to the Creation [1495]. I think that the troubles which have beset the Jews in all the kingdoms of Edom from the year 5050 [1490] of the sixth millennium until the year 5255 [1495]—it is a time of trouble for Jacob, but he shall be delivered from it [Jeremiah 30:7]—these are the birth pangs of the messianic age. And the wars that took place in Italy when the king of France named Carlo [Charles VIII] came, these are the events prophesied by Daniel regarding the king of the north: to destroy the nations, to set up an abomination that desolates [Daniel 11:31, 12:11].

Given the prevalent atmosphere, it is not surprising that religious fervor played a role in the acts of the French soldiery, and this might explain the preference for conversion over massacre. For their part, the Jews were probably demoralized by manifold disasters in a short time: the expulsions from Spain and Sicily, the terrible plague that decimated the population of Naples in 1493, the death of Ferrante I, the French invasion, and the outbreaks of violence.

The general state of anarchy in southern Italy in any case prevented effective interference by the authorities. No one attempted to quell the riots and there was no judiciary power in place to punish the offenders. If Gampel's assessment that the main cause for the spread of the riots in 1391 was the weakness of the monarchy, how much more would a total absence of central power

96 A manuscript of the “Opus Davidicum” is housed in the Bibliothèque Nationale of Paris; see Linder, “L'expédition italienne de Charles VIII,” 179–86.

97 *Sefer ha-Peliah* (Book of Wonder), a fourteenth-century kabbalistic work. The colophon was published by Kraus, “Le roi de France Charles VIII et les espérances messianiques,” 87–96.

have contributed to the disaster of 1495? Finally, an examination of the events of 1495 leads to the conclusion that many shared factors can be found in mass conversions fueled by popular violence: economic resentment for the role of the Jews as moneylenders and pawnbrokers, popular religious fervor that overrides the more conservative attitudes of the established Church and, above all, the absence of a strong central power that led to a general state of anarchy.

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