

OFFERING ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL BENEFITS AS INCENTIVES FOR
CONVERSION – THE CASE OF SICILY AND SOUTHERN ITALY (12TH-15TH CENTURIES)

Conversion of the Jews had been the aim of the Christian Church from its very beginnings. Nevertheless, in early Christian theological thinking the Pauline interpretation of the prophecy «a remnant shall be saved» was understood to mean that the conversion of all the Jews everywhere would occur only in the distant future.¹ In time the Church increased its missionary pressure on the Jews to convert by various means. Although violence and forceful conversion were never officially advocated by the Church, other methods were often brought into play, among them were increasing restrictions on practising Jews, polemics against Jews and Judaism, preaching to the Jews (and forcing them to attend the sermons), and finally, attracting new converts by the promise of material gains. Already Pope Gregory the Great proposed the offering of «temporal benefits» to new converts. He argued that even insincere conversions would eventually lead to Christ's grace «because, even if they themselves come with little faith, those who shall be born of them will already be baptized with more faith. So we gain either them or their children».² Church policy in favour of rewarding new converts is formulated explicitly for the first time in the ruling of the Third Lateran Council (1179) which decreed that: «converts ought to be in better circumstances than they had been before accepting the Faith». This position was reiterated by Pope In-

nocent III who argued that «a new plant should not only be strengthened by the dew of doctrine, but also nourished by temporal benefits». Later papal letters and conciliar decrees insisted a convert should not lose property rights because of his (or hers) conversion.³

The principle of rewarding new converts was not readily accepted by lay authorities. A Jew's conversion posed two problems for the prince: financial loss, as a Christian paid less taxes than a Jew, and the break of the implicitly contractual relationship between ruler and Jew. Therefore, according to the prevailing norms, the ruler could treat the convert as a rebellious vassal. Princes customarily confiscated the property of converts.⁴

The Norman kingdom of Sicily was, possibly, an exception to this rule. During the conquest period, that is, the second half of the eleventh century, Count Roger of Hauteville gave lands to converts from Islam. However, support of conversion was never very consistent in this period and it depended on the circumstances. According to Eadmer, the biographer of Bishop Anselm of Canterbury, when Anselm attempted to convert the Muslim soldiers who were besieging the city of Capua, he was told that Count Roger opposed their baptism. Nevertheless, many converts from Islam are mentioned during the period of the Norman monarchy.⁵ But the only reference to a Norman ruler encouraging

¹ ST. PAUL, *Epistle to the Romans* 9,27-28; Augustine's teachings do not put a great emphasis on the conversion of the Jews, focusing instead on their role as witnesses: S. SIMONSOHN, *The Apostolic See and the Jews*, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Toronto 1991, vol. I, pp. 4-6. On the Jews' role as witnesses and «bearers of the books» in Augustinian thinking, see: J. COHEN, *Living Letters of the Law. Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity*, Univ. of California Press, Berkeley - Los Angeles - London 1999, pp. 23-71.

² SIMONSOHN, *The Apostolic See*, op. cit., pp. 11-12; Id., *The Jews of Sicily*, Brill, Leiden 1997, vol. I, no. 28 (BARTOLOMEO & GIUSEPPE LAGUMINA, *Codice diplomatico dei Giudei di Sicilia*, Palermo 1884-1890, vol. I, reprint Palermo 1992, pp. 1-9).

³ S. GRAYZEL, *The Church and the Jews in the XIIIth Century* (revised edition), Hermon Press, New York 1966, vol. I, pp. 16-19. Decree of Third Lateran Council, doc. no. 1.

⁴ *Ivi*, p. 19.

⁵ R.W. SOUTHERN (ed.), *The Life of St. Anselm*,

the conversion of *Jews* appears in the chronicle of Romuald of Salerno where the writer attributes to King Roger II the offering of financial rewards to new Christian converts from Judaism and Islam: «Towards the end of his life [...] he [the king] laboured in every conceivable way to convert Jews and Muslims to the faith of Christ, and endowed converts with many gifts and resources».⁶ Although this passage is considered to be a later interpolation to the original text of Romuald, it is generally agreed that it belongs to the end of the twelfth century and no later than the beginning of the thirteenth.⁷ By the time this text was written, whether historically true or not, such an act of piety was construed to be necessary for the prestige of a Christian prince.

Indeed, during the thirteenth century lay rulers began to conform to the Church's position on offering material benefits to converts. In 1233 a *Domus Conversorum* was established in England and it continued to function even after the expulsion of the Jews.⁸ A letter of Innocent IV from 1245 indicates a change of royal policy

on these matters in Aragon as well. The pontifical letter praises the statutes of James I for promising that «any Jew or Saracen who converts to Christianity will be permitted to keep all his goods which were his before his conversion, and no other previous law or custom shall stand in the way». The statutes also restrict the rights of inheritance of a convert's Jewish (or Muslim) relatives.⁹ In France, around the same time, Louis IX offered new converts monetary benefits from a special fund. Financial support of converts continued in France under Philippe Le Bel.¹⁰

The policies of the Swabian rulers in Sicily and south Italy are not as clear on this matter. Frederick II allowed Dominican friars to come and preach to the Muslims of Lucera and in 1236 he claimed that one third of them had indeed converted to Christianity, but modern scholars cast some doubts on the emperor's readiness to actually convert the Muslims. In a recent study on the Lucera colony, Julie Anne Taylor suggests that Frederick might have held

Archbishop of Canterbury, by EADMER, T. Nelson, London 1962, pp. 110-112; U. RIZZITANO, *Ruggero il Gran Conte e gli Arabi di Sicilia*, in *Ruggero il Gran Conte e l'inizio dello stato normanno: relazioni e comunicazioni nelle Seconde Giornate normanno-sveve Bari 1975*, Rome 1977, pp. 205-208; B.Z. KEDAR, *Crusade and Mission: European approaches toward the Muslims*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1984, pp. 50-52; J. JOHNS, *Arabic Administration in Norman Sicily. The Royal Diwan*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002; B. ZEITLER, «Urbs felix dotata populo trilingui»: some thoughts about a twelfth-century funerary memorial from Palermo, «Medieval Encounters» 2/2 (1996), pp. 114-139; G. MANDALÀ, La sottoscrizione araba di 'Abd al-Masih (Palermo, 15 ottobre 1201), «Quaderni di Studi Arabi» no. 3 (2008), pp. 153-164. This is a limited reference bibliography, as the number of studies concerning Muslims in medieval Sicily is enormous, therefore, even providing a list of recent publications is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁶ «Circa finem autem vite sue secularibus negotiis aliquantulum postpositis et ommissis, Iudeos et Sarracenos ad fidem Christi convertere modis omnibus laborabat, et conversis dona plurima et necessaria conferebat», ROMUALDUS SALERNITANUS, *Chronicon*, ed. C.A. GARUFI, RIS², vol. VIII, Bologna 1935, p. 236.

⁷ On dating this problematic passage, see: D.

MATTHEW, *The Chronicle of Romuald of Salerno, in The Writing of History in the Middle Ages: Essays Presented to Richard William Southern*, ed. R.H. Davis and J.M., Oxford 1981, pp. 239-274; H. Houben, *King Roger II of Sicily. A Ruler between East and West*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002, pp. 110-112.

⁸ On the «Domus Conversorum» in England, see: R.C. STACEY, *The conversion of Jews to Christianity in thirteenth-century England*, «Speculum» 67 (1992), pp. 263-283.

⁹ GRAYZEL, *The Church and the Jews*, op. cit., vol. I, pp. 254-257; SIMONSOHN, *The Apostolic See*, op. cit., no. 173, pp. 183-184.

¹⁰ For the conversionist policies of Louis IX, see: W.C. JORDAN, *The French Monarchy and the Jews*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 1989, pp. 149-150; G. NAHON, *Les ordonnances de Saint Louis sur les juifs*, «Les nouveaux Cahiers» 23 (1970), pp. 18-35 (esp. pp. 22-23, 30); D. BEHRMAN, *Volumina vilissima, a sermon of Eudes de Châteauroux on the Jews and their Talmud in Le brûlement du Talmud à Paris, 1242-1244*, ed. G. Dahan, Paris 1999, pp. 191-209 (esp. p. 194). Behrman discusses the sermon titled *De conversione Iudeorum* and its influence on royal policy. For a list of converted Jews and the pensions they received (albeit by the end of the 13th century), see: G. NAHON, *Contribution à l'histoire de Juifs en France sous Philippe le*

«a dim view of conversions since they would have reduced royal income».¹¹ With regard to the Jews, we are on safer ground to conclude that he did not seek their conversion. In a privilege granted to the Jews of Viena in 1238 the emperor declared that he was opposed to forced conversions and imposed fines on the offenders. The emperor also ordered that potential converts should be required to wait three days before being baptized in order to test their sincerity, but more important for our discussion, is his statement that converts should not profit from their change of religion: «[those who] relinquished the law of their forefathers, shall also renquish their patrimony».¹² We may conclude, therefore, that Frederick still adhered to the old principle whereby lay rulers were entitled to confiscate a convert's property.

Angevin policies towards the Jews in the Kingdom of Naples and in Provence, as Joseph Shatzmiller has recently observed, were characterized by inconsistencies, even contradictions.¹³ On the one hand, they needed the income brought by the high taxes set on Jews and Muslims who were officially considered as *servi camere nostri* and protected as such,¹⁴ but on the other, their religious zeal motivated them to encourage their conversion to Christianity.¹⁵ It is probable that the precedents established by the kings of France influenced to some extent

the Angevins' religious policy. This may explain why King Charles I of Anjou decided to act upon the accusations against the Talmud and Jewish prayer books brought by a converted Jew, Manuforte (or Monteforte), a former rabbi in the synagogue of Trani.¹⁶ Charles I rewarded Manuforte in 1267 with an income of six onces from the dye works of Trani. Manuforte's conversion was not an isolated, individual act, but part of a larger movement of conversions as hinted in another privilege he was granted in 1269 (where it is said «that many converts are reverting to Judaism»),¹⁷ however, there is no evidence that these converts enjoyed any financial benefits. The next Angevin king, Charles II, forced his Jewish subjects to undergo a mass-conversion. The loss of the Angevin archives prevents us from learning the exact circumstances, but both a Jewish source (*Shevet Jehuda*) and the testimony of a Dominican friar, Giordano da Rivalto, indicate that the trigger was probably an accusation of ritual murder or desecration of the Cross. According to *Shevet Jehuda*:

in the year of that expulsion [i.e. 1290, referring to the expulsion of the Jews from England] two great communités were forced to convert, and most have converted [...] I heard from the elders that a priest (or friar) quarrelled with a Jew of Trani [...] and he put the tree of Jesus [a wooden cross] in the

Bel, «REJ» 121 (1962), pp. 76-77.

¹¹ D. ABULAFIA, *Monarchs and minorities in the medieval Mediterranean c. 1300: Lucera and its analogues*, in P. DIEHL - S. WAUGH (eds.), *Christendom and its Discontents. Exclusion, Persecution and Rebellion, 1000-1500*, Cambridge 1996, pp. 234-263, and more recently: J.A. TAYLOR, *Muslims in Medieval Italy. The Colony at Lucera*, Lanham, MD 2005, pp. 50-51; A. METCALF, *The Muslims of Medieval Italy*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2009, pp. 283-298.

¹² «[...] et sicut legem patrum suorum reliquit, ita etiam relinquat hereditatem», J.L.A. HUILLARD-BRÉHOLLES, *Historia Diplomatica Friderici Secundi*, reprint Bottega D'Erasmus, Turin 1963, vol. 5.1, p. 221.

¹³ J. SHATZMILLER, *The Angevins of Naples and the Jews* in S. SIMONSOHN - J. SHATZMILLER, *The Italia Judaica Jubilee Conference*, Brill, Leiden-Boston 2013, p. 217.

¹⁴ Some new information on the life of Jews and

Muslims under the first Angevin king has come to light in the 1990s: H. HOUBEN, *Neue Quellen zur Geschichte der Juden und Sarazenen im Königreich Sizilien (1275-1280)*, «Quellen und Forschungen aus Italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken» 74 (1994), pp. 335-359.

¹⁵ On the religious zeal and royal ideology of Charles I of Anjou, see: J. DUNBABIN, *The French in the Kingdom of Sicily, 1266-1305*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2011, pp. 189-198. An important aspect of the Angevin kingship was the concept of saintly lineage (*beata stirps*): *ivi*, p. 189 (and notes). On the activities of inquisitors in the Regno, see: *ivi*, p. 183.

¹⁶ U. CASSUTO, *Sulla storia degli ebrei nell'Italia meridionale*, «Il Vessillo Israelitico» 59 (1911), p. 338; J. COHEN, *The Friars and the Jews. The Evolution of Medieval Anti-Judaism*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1982, pp. 85-89; SHATZMILLER, *The Angevins*, op. cit., p. 218.

¹⁷ CASSUTO, *Sulla storia*, op. cit., p. 338.

garbage of a Jew and in the morning he told that he had dreamed a dream which revealed to him how the Jews put the wood in the garbage [...] and the wood was found in the garbage of a Jew [...] and the people were filled with fury and sought to destroy all the Jews. And when the Judges heard that, they wished to save the people [to prevent them from unjustly killing the Jews], because they suspected that the priest was behind the deed. But when they saw that they were powerless against them, as the people formed such a strong crowd, they advised the Jews to convert and be saved as there was no other way. And most converted, and some of the Jews escaped to Naples and the Gentiles chased them [even there].¹⁸

According to Giordano da Rivalto, who wrote about fourteen years after the mass-conversions, the Jews converted after being accused of ritual murder, rather than desecration of the cross. However, a careful reading of Giordano da Rivalto reveals that he too accuses the Jews of «crucifying Christ again and again» (*Christum crucifigentes rursum in semetipsis*), and that they continue to crucify him by harming Christian children and desecrating holy images.¹⁹ It is worthwhile analyzing the Dominican's sermons as they offer a glimpse into the attitudes of a thirteenth century preacher towards the Jews, and particularly into the allegations of Jewish

desecration of holy images, the Host, and ritual murder.²⁰ But such a study goes well beyond the scope of the present discussion.

In any case, both versions claim that the Jews converted out of fear rather than conviction, and yet, the Angevin king and his successors proved generous towards the new converts. According to the sources cited by Ferorelli, the *neofiti* of several localities in the south were granted exemptions from tax payment. Ferorelli calculated these to number about 1300 individuals, probably men only, which would mean the total number of converts was considerably higher.²¹ The exemption was extended also to other new converts (possibly from Islam) in other parts of the kingdom, as hinted at by the reference to *novos christianos habitantes in diversis partibus Capitanate* who were excused from paying the *donum* tax.²² Tax exemptions for Jewish converts were renewed in 1298, and again in 1312.

However, the Angevin conversionist policies left no trace in the island kingdom of Sicily. The surviving documentation indicates that Charles I of Anjou confirmed privileges previously accorded to the Jews and did not attempt to change their status as it was formed during almost two centuries of Norman rule.²³ This can

¹⁸ בשנת הגירוש הנזכר [1290] נאנסו ב' קהלות גדולות נאפוליש וטראנה לשימירו דת, והמירו רובם. וסבת השמד לא מצאתיו... שמעתי מזקנים כי כומר אחד נתקוטט עם יהודי בעיר טראנה [...] וישם עץ ישו (כלומר צלב) באשפת איש יהודי ואמר בבקר שחלום חלם איך היהודים שמו העץ באשפה [...] ונמצא בבית איש יהודי באשפתו [...] אז העם נתמלא חמה, ובקשו לשלוח יחד בכל היהודים. והשופטים כשמעם קמו להציל את העם, כי היו חושדים כי מיד הכומר היתה זאת. וכי ראו השופטים כי אין כחם כנגדם, כי העם רב מאד, יעצו ליהודים שימירו דת וינצלו, כי אין להם תקנה אחרת. ורובם המירו, ומקצת היהודים ברחו לנאפוליש, והגוים רדפו אחריהם. SOLOMON IBN VERGA, *Ševet Yehudah*, ed. A. SHOHET, Mossad Bialik, Jerusalem 1947, p. 66. The translation is mine (N.Z.).

¹⁹ On Giordano da Rivalto and his preaching, see: C. DELCORNIO, *Giordano da Pisa e l'antica predicazione volgare*, L.S. Olschki, Firenze 1975, p. 23.

²⁰ There is a connection between accusations of ritual murder and desecration of the Host or Christian cult objects, see: M. RUBIN, *Corpus Christi. The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991; EAD., *Desecration of the Host: The Birth of an Accusation*, in

D. WOOD (ed.), *Christianity and Judaism*, Blackwell, Oxford 1992, pp. 169-185; I.J. YUVAL, *Two Nations in your Womb. Perceptions of Jews and Christians* [Hebrew], Am Oved, Tel Aviv 2000, pp. 180, 210.

²¹ A. MARONGIU, *Gli ebrei di Salerno nei documenti dei secoli X-XIII*, «Archivio storico per le province napoletane» XXIII (1937), pp. 61-66; N. FERORELLI, *Gli ebrei nell'Italia meridionale dall'età romana al secolo XVIII*, a c. di Filena Patroni Griffi, D. Peerson, Napoli 1990, p. 68. And more recently: J. SHATZMILLER, *Les Angevins et les juifs de leur états*, in *L'État Angevin. Pouvoir, culture et société entre XIIIe et XIVe siècle. Actes du colloque international organisé par l'American Academy in Rome - l'Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medio Evo. (Rome - Naples, 7-11 novembre 1995)*, École française de Rome, Rome 1998, pp. 298-300 (esp. pp. 292-294).

²² *Codice Diplomatico dei Saraceni di Lucera*, ed. Pietro Egidi, Stab. Tip. L. Pierro & figlio 1917, no. 121 (quoted in TAYLOR, *Muslims in Medieval*, op. cit., p. 175).

²³ For the documents issued by the Angevin administration in Sicily, see: SIMONSOHN, *The Jews*

probably be explained by his relatively short reign and his lack of interest in Sicilian internal affairs.

Significant change of policy came with the establishment of the Aragonese dynasty in the Kingdom of Sicily. Although they never approved of forced conversions, the Aragonese rulers tended to favour converts. The constitution of King Federigo (1310-1312) decrees that “Nevertheless, the aforesaid neophytes, after their baptism, should not be affected by wrongful [words] or reproached by insults, but they should be treated with brotherly charity and human goodness [...] it is forbidden to call neophytes who are slaves or had been Jews by insulting names such as *canes renegatos* [...] for they might revert from Faith to Perfidy and from Truth to Error [...]”.²⁴ Incidentally, this protective measure reveals the problems encountered by those who converted: they were not fully accepted into Christian society and carried the stigma of being of Jewish, Muslim, or servile descent. Thus, in a way, the statute can be considered as a form of reward to new converts by promising to improve (or safeguard) their social standing compared to their former status as Jews, slaves, etc. There is, however, no mention of economic benefits. And yet, around that time, King James II of Aragon renewed the promise granted by his predecessor which allowed new converts to keep the property they had held before their conversion.²⁵ James II was for a short time was also king of Sicily so

it stands to reason that the same policies applied there too, but this conjecture is not supported by documentary evidence.

In the fifteenth century granting economic benefits to new converts became more or less common practice. It usually meant waiving debts owed by new converts or their deferment. In 1475 a woman of Catania named Gianella (or Beatrice)²⁶ Jarratana petitioned the authorities to be excused from payment of a debt of five onze and three tari owed by her father, the Jew Sabatinu Pernichi. The house she stood to inherit from her late father was requisitioned by the Crown because of the debt, but the Viceroy ordered that it shall be given to her because she was a New Christian (*xpiana novella*) and the debt annulled.²⁷ This decision meant that the new convert was not simply allowed to keep her family property after conversion, but that she was also forgiven the debt owed by her father. Salvo Solima, a blacksmith of Caltagirone, was granted a moratorium on his debts for two years and the reason given is that he was a New Christian.²⁸ Raffaele Chetib, a Jew of Malta who converted around 1486 and was baptized as Colantoni Caxaro, was also granted a moratorium of two years on his debts.²⁹ The famous Guglielmo Raimondo Moncada also was the recipient of various monetary grants and other benefits. Although much has been written about him (and many previously unknown details concerning his life and origins came to light in recent years),

in Sicily, op. cit., vol. I, nos. 225-233.

²⁴ «Verumtamen quia predicti neophyti post tantam divinam baptismatis gratiam non sunt afficiendi contumeliis nec injuriis exprobandi quinymmo caritate ac humana debent benignitate tractari [...] videlicet vocando eos vel aliquem ex eiusdem servis canes renegatos per que videtur eidem baptismati derogari [...] quod de fide ad perfidiam et de veritate declinaverint ad errorem»: SIMONSOHN, *The Jews in Sicily*, op. cit., vol. II, no. 339.

²⁵ James II: «Quod si iudeus vel Saracenus fidem orthodoxa (*sic*) accipere voluerit, nihil de bonis suis perdat», in L. ALANYA, *Aureum opus regaliū privilegiorum civitatis et regni Valentiae*, (Valencia 1515, reprint in 1972), cited by Y.T. ASSIS, *The Papal Inquisition and Aragonese Jewry in the Early Fourteenth Century*, «Medieval Studies» XLIX (1987), p. 395, note 17.

²⁶ There is some doubt as to her baptismal name

since on one document concerning her petition she is named Beatrice, whereas on the margins of another document her name is given as Gianella.

²⁷ The concession is mentioned in two documents of the Sicilian administration: Archivio di Stato di Palermo (ASP), *Real Cancelleria*, reg. 132, c. 156v; ASP, *Tribunale Real Patrimonio*, Lettere Viceregie, reg. 124, cc. 495r-496r published in SIMONSOHN, *The Jews in Sicily*, op. cit., vol. 6, no. 4116; the case of this converted woman is also discussed in N. ZELDES, *The Converted Jews of Sicily before and after the Expulsion (1460-1550)*, Ph.D. Thesis, Tel-Aviv University, Tel-Aviv 1997, p. 95.

²⁸ ASP, *Real Protonotaro del Regno*, reg. 124, cc. 143v-144r; SIMONSOHN, *The Jews in Sicily*, op. cit., vol. 7, no. 5020.

²⁹ ASP, *Protonotaro del Regno*, reg. 124, c. 39r; published in SIMONSOHN, *The Jews in Sicily*, op. cit., vol. 7, no. 4977.

the financial aspects of his conversion are perhaps worthy of further study.³⁰

Converted women were allowed to keep the dowries they received as Jews. In a will made out in 1505, Manfredo La Muta of Palermo promised to return the dowry his wife was given by her father while they had both been Jews.³¹ In other words, the dowry was still his to give as it had not been confiscated after the couple's conversion. But in this respect the laws of Sicily were probably similar to those of other places in Italy. Local law insisted that in case of conversion all legally binding promises made beforehand by members of the convert's family who remained Jews must be respected, including dowries bestowed on daughters who later converted.³² Thus, Clemenza da Pisa, albeit belonging to a different social stratum than the La Muta family, was allowed in 1480 to keep the dowry given by her Jewish father, Yehiel da Pisa.³³

And yet, tax exemptions and waiving payment of debts were by no means universal policy in Italy during the pre-modern period. Venice, in particular, was reluctant to lose income from the taxation of the Jews living in her colonies. In 1485 Francesco Bragadin, the Venetian governor of Modon, received an order that no Jew

should be exempted from the *angaria*, even if he or she converted to Christianity (*quod aliquis Iudeus vel Iudea non possit franchari ab aliqua angaria, nisi per assumptionem baptismatis, et sic tibi commisimus quod debeas observare*).³⁴

To return to the Italian south, it must be stressed that financial considerations played an important role also in the post-expulsion period. Cardo or Ricardo de Licardio of Palermo, who was baptized in Cosenza around 1495, asked to be exempted from debts he had incurred in Sicily before the expulsion arguing that it is only because he converted and returned to Sicily that he is forced to pay his debts. He should be exempted because «had he remained a Jew and gone to the infidels, as many other Jews had done, and so his creditors wouldn't have been able to bother him» (*et si ipso supplicanti havissi voluto perseverare in la judayca perfidia, non haveria retornato in quisto regno, ma sindi haveria andato a li infidili como fichero assay altry judey et cussi soi creditori non lo haveriano potuto molestari*). His petition was granted and at the same time we learn that other *neofiti* were granted similar concessions.³⁵

The most striking example of linking economic considerations and conversion are the terms of return granted to Sicilian *neofiti* as a

³⁰ There is such a vast literature on Moncada, both recent and old that it is impossible to list it all. Here is a partial bibliography: R. STARRABBA, *Guglielmo Raimondo Moncada, ebreo convertito siciliano del secolo XV*, «Archivio Storico Siciliano» 3 (1878), pp. 15-91; S. SIMONSOHN, *Some Well-Known Jewish Converts during the Renaissance*, «Revue des Études Juives» 148 (1989), pp. 17-52; ID., *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola on Jews and Judaism*, in J. COHEN (ed.), *From Witness to Witchcraft. Jews and Judaism in Medieval Christian Thought*, Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden 1992, pp. 402-417; CH. WIRSZUBSKI, *Flavius Mithridates, Sermo de Passione Domini*, The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Jerusalem 1963, pp. 35-41, 58. On Moncada's city of birth and family ties: A. SCANDALIATO, *Le radici familiari e culturali di Guglielmo Raimondo Moncada, ebreo converso nell'«Isola dello Specchio»*, in M. PERANI, *Una manna buona per Mantova. Man tov le-Man Tovah, Studi in onore di Vittore Colorni per il suo 92° compleanno*, Leo Olshchki Editore, Firenze 2004, pp. 203-240; EAD., *Le radici siciliane di Flavio Mitridate*, «Sefer Yuhasin»

20 (2004), pp. 3-17.

³¹ ASP, *Notai Defunti*, Pietro Tagliante reg. 1181, c. 69r-71v, published in: N. ZELDES, *The Last Will and Testament of a Sicilian Converso*, «Revue des Études Juives» 159 (2000), pp. 447-459 (the Appendix); EAD., *The Former Jews of this Kingdom. Sicilian Converts after the Expulsion (1492-1516)*, Brill, Leiden 2003, Appendix VII, pp. 312-314.

³² U. CASSUTO, *Gli ebrei a Firenze nell'età del rinascimento*, Tip. Galletti & Cassuto, Firenze 1918, p. 203.

³³ M. LUZZATI, *Per la storia degli Ebrei italiani nel Rinascimento. Matrimoni e apostasia di Clemenza di Vitale da Pisa*, in ID., *La Casa dell'Ebreo. Saggi sugli Ebrei a Pisa e in Toscana nel Medioevo e nel Rinascimento*, Nistri-Lischi, Pisa 1985, pp. 61-106.

³⁴ C.N. SATHAS, (ed.), *Documents inédits relatifs à l'histoire de la Grece au Moyen Age*, Maisonneuve, Paris 1880-90, vol. I, p. 294.

³⁵ ASP, *Protonotaro de Regno*, reg. 189, c. 111v-112v, published in ZELDES, *The Former Jews of this Kingdom*, op. cit., app. II, pp. 300-301.

group after the expulsion. These converts came from among the Sicilian Jews who crossed the straits of Messina after being expelled in 1492-3 and settled in the Kingdom of Naples. The disasters that befell the Jewries of that kingdom after the death of Ferrante I proved that it could not be considered as a safe haven, and what's more, considerable numbers from among the exiles and the local Jews were forced to convert during the period of anarchy between 1494 and 1495.³⁶ The agreement made out in 1497 between the Aragonese court and the convert Ferrando de Aragona, who was acting as the appointed representative of the Sicilian *neofiti*, promised to allow them to recover 55% of their property left in the Kingdom of Sicily in the aftermath of the expulsion. One may argue that the terms were not very favourable to the converts, they had to cede 45% in order to gain the rest. However, contrary to the terms of return granted in the Spanish kingdoms to individuals who were baptized after the expulsion (and were permitted to recover their entire property),³⁷ for Sicilian *neofiti*, the terms addressed a large number of people who are defined as a juridical body (*universitas neofitorum*). The returning exiles probably numbered thousands of individuals, or at least they were the wealthiest since the resulting sum of money collected from the payment of the tax amounted to 65,000 florins. However, the main difference between the terms granted to returning converted Jews in the Iberian kingdoms and those offered the Sicilians, was that the latter could rely on a bureaucratic machinery specifically set in place by the Crown in order to ensure the recovery of property. The *commissarii ad causas*

iudeorum intervened in favour of converts forcing various Old Christians to cede houses and vineyards, return debts, and so on.³⁸ Thus, the returning exiles enjoyed the advantage of being able to recover their former property with the backing of the authorities, while the Crown and certain members of the Sicilian elites gained a source of income which would have otherwise remained in the hands of private persons.

The Aragonese rulers of the Kingdom of Naples did not address much the presence of their convert subjects (known as *neofiti* or *cristiani novelli*) who remained a distinct group since the mass-conversions of the late thirteenth century. Only after the restauration of the Aragonese dynasty King Frederick II of Aragon needed to concern himself with the large population of new converts. In 1496, following a petition of the New Christians of Catanzaro in Calabria, the king ordered that they should not be harrassed by the inquisitors and be allowed to sell their movable and immovable property. They were also made to pay only the ordinary taxes and nothing beyond that.³⁹ It should be pointed out that in this case the sovereign did not desire the conversion, nor did he do anything to bring it about. In 1496 the king was faced with an accomplished fact, a mass-conversion brought about by circumstances beyond his control, therefore he probably felt no need to reward these *Cristiani novelli*. His promise to safeguard the property rights of Jews and new converts should be understood as an attempt to restore order to his kingdom and promote its economic recovery.⁴⁰ The «converso question» in the kingdom of Naples was resolved with the expulsion of 1510

³⁶ FERORELLI, *Gli ebrei*, op. cit., pp. 199-211; F. RUIZ MARTÍN, *La expulsión de los Judíos del reino de Nápoles*, «Hispania» IX (1949), pp. 28-76, 179-240; V. BONAZZOLI, *Gli ebrei del regno di Napoli all'epoca della loro espulsione*, «Archivio Storico Italiano» 137 (1979), pp. 495-599; N. ZELDES, *Sefardi and Sicilian Exiles in the Kingdom of Naples: Settlement, Community Formation, and Crisis*, «Hispania Judaica Bulletin» 6 (2008), pp. 237-265.

³⁷ H. BEINART, *The expulsion of Jews from Spain*, trans. from the Hebrew by J.M. Green, The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, Oxford-Portland 2002, pp. 330-331.

³⁸ On the 45% tax in Sicily, see: ZELDES, *The For-*

mer Jews of this Kingdom, op. cit., pp. 71-83. On Ferrando de Aragona: *ivi*, pp. 75-79, 271-276 and 306-310; EAD., *The Extraordinary Career of Ferrando de Aragona: A Sicilian Converso in the Service of Fernando the Catholic*, «Hispania Judaica Bulletin» 3 (2001), pp. 97-125; EAD., *Sefardi and Sicilian Exiles*, op. cit., p. 252.

³⁹ C. COLAFEMMINA, *The Jews in Calabria*, Brill, Leiden-Boston 2012, no. 384, pp. 437-438.

⁴⁰ The same issues are again mentioned in the statutes of 1498: B. FERRANTE, *Gli statuti di Federico d'Aragona per gli ebrei del regno* «Archivio Storico per le Province Napoletane» XCVII (1979), p. 147. The text was also published by C. COLAFEMMINA,

ordered by Ferdinand the Catholic.⁴¹ In Sicily the Spanish Inquisition pursued the converts, investigated, and condemned thousands of them during the first half of the sixteenth century. Far from being rewarded for embracing Christianity, many of the Sicilian converts lost their property through confiscation, fines imposed by the Inquisition, or long imprisonment which ate up their savings.⁴²

To sum up, the monarchies of southern Italy favoured conversions and tended to economically reward new converts, either directly by giving them an income, or through exemptions, waiving of debts, and the like. But their

religious policy was never very consistent. Only after the expulsions of the Jews from the south, it was in other places and in a different political and religious climate that new converts were given methodical religious instruction, some economic support, or even a modest marriage portion in the «holy house of converts» (*Pia casa de Catecumeni*), an institution which sprang in up in Rome, Venice, and other Italian cities.

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SUMMARY

The Church, at least since Gregory the Great, advocated the offer of “temporal benefits” to new converts, but lay authorities were not as anxious to lose the income they exacted from their Jewish subjects. Moreover, a prince could legally confiscate the property of a Jewish convert to Christianity (since the lord lost a source of income). In time, the tensions between Church policy and lay rulers’ interests were resolved by royal declarations in favour of allowing converts to keep their property. Royal favour was sometimes extended to tax exemptions, privileges, and even financial help to indigent converts.

The monarchies of south Italy tended to favor conversions. Earlier than other rulers in western Christendom, King Roger II of Sicily (1195-1154) bestowed gifts on converts from Judaism and Islam. In later times, both the Angevins in southern Italy and the Aragonese in Sicily offered tax exemptions and other benefits to converted Jews. Economic factors played a role in the return of converted Jews to Sicily after the expulsion. The present article examines the developments in royal policy in regard to conversion of the Jews in these areas till the end of the fifteenth century.

KEYWORDS: Conversion; Taxation; South Italy and Sicily; 12th-15th Centuries.

Gli ebrei a Taranto. Fonti documentarie, Società di storia patria per la Puglia, Bari 2005, no. 98, pp. 149-161.

⁴¹ On the expulsion of 1510, see the articles published in the acts of the congress held in Naples in 2010: G. LACERENZA (ed.), *1510/2010 Cinquecen-*

tenario dell’espulsione degli ebrei dall’Italia meridionale. Atti del convegno internazionale, Napoli, Università “l’Orientale” 22-23 novembre 2010, Napoli 2013.

⁴² ZELDES, *The Former Jews of this Kingdom*, cit., pp. 162-171, 194-216.