

## Reseña de libros

### **Francesca Trivellato**

*The Familiarity of Strangers. The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period*

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009;  
488 págs.

It is a well-known paradox of the Sephardi experience that this relatively small ethnic group established itself as a major player in certain areas of early modern long-distance trade. Sephardi merchants lived in port cities dotting the Christian and Muslim Mediterranean and the Atlantic seaboard, such as London, Bordeaux, Amsterdam, Venice, Livorno, Tunis, and Salonika. They conducted business from the Caribbean to the Indian sub-continent, trading primarily in New World goods, raw silk and Asian spices, as well as Indian diamonds, Mediterranean coral, ostrich feathers and eggs, leather, paper, and glassware.

Even though Sephardi Jews relied on small- and medium-size partnerships and lacked the organized support of a state to back their mercantile pursuits, historians have come to recognize them as a highly successful trading diaspora. How was it possible for members of this close-knit, highly endogamous group, vulnerable to anti-Jewish sentiments and subject to a variety of legal restrictions in practi-

cally all the regions where they settled, to build such a reputation for commercial prowess? A common explanation for the early modern Sephardim's accomplishments is the assumption that networks built on existing ties of family and ethnic solidarity supported their mercantile activities. Engrained intra-group trust fostered by bonds of kinship or familiarity, many believe, must have furthered Sephardi commercial pursuits. Francesca Trivellato's masterful study *The Familiarity of Strangers*, however, persuasively questions the mainstream of historiography on early modern trade networks and proves that the reality of Sephardi commerce was much more complex and nuanced than previously believed.

The discovery of over thirteen thousand business letters documenting the activity of the Livornese firm Ergas and Silvera between 1704 and 1746 allows Trivellato to skillfully reconstruct the ways in which an eighteenth-century Sephardi partnership created its fortune; the legal, social, and economic mechanisms that sustained its business networks from the Atlantic, through the Mediterranean, all the way to the Indian Ocean; and the obstacles and mistakes that ultimately brought about its demise. A superb example of "global history on a small scale" (p. 7), the study follows the wide-reaching connections of the Livornese Sephardim while paying close attention to the political and economic contexts within which Ergas and Silvera operated.

Ergas and Silvera built their far-flung business activities on difficult premises. The firm's main branch was located in the Tuscan *entrepôt* of Livorno, a thriving Mediterranean hub that profited from the presence of a number of "trading nations," living side by side with a deeply devout Catholic population (Jews accounted for approximately 9-12% of Livorno's inhabitants). Ergas and Silvera also held a subsidiary branch in Ottoman Aleppo, where the Tuscan state was unable to offer protection to Livornese Sephardi merchants. While the partners tended to rely on other Sephardim in London and Amsterdam and parts of the Levant, where Jews had a near-monopoly over certain market niches, they were also active in multiple Christian ports (such as Lisbon, Marseilles, and Portuguese Goa in India) where such intra-group trade was impossible, because Jewish presence was not allowed. And yet, despite the numerous challenges that ambitious Jewish merchants like Ergas and Silvera faced in the corporate society of the Old Regime, they managed to engineer new business opportunities by maintaining a complex web of contacts with ostensibly improbable allies, such as Catholic Italians in Lisbon and Brahmins in Goa. Trivellato's research illuminates the ways in which Ergas and Silvera were able to build such stable and profitable business relationships beyond their own diaspora, through "the creative combination of group discipline, contractual obligations, customary norms, political protection, and discursive conventions" that sustained the cross-cultural trade of the Sephardim of Livorno (p. 16).

The book's approach is three-pronged. Chapters 1-3 and 5 show how specific kinship arrangements, demographic patterns, and community structures affected the business organization of Ergas and Silvera and their ability to engage in cross-cultural trade. Marriage was a crucial vehicle to secure the cooperation of relatives and coreligionists and to expand commercial opportunities. Trivellato illustrates how the large dowries of Livornese Sephardi

marriages, in conjunction with consanguineous (and sometimes levirate) unions, allowed Ergas and Silvera to raise capital and to ensure its protection from generation to generation (p. 136). The study thus contributes to and corroborates recent research on the importance of dowries for the devolution of Jewish patrimonies (in Italy dowries were traditionally protected from creditors in case of bankruptcy).

Of great interest is chapter 4's investigation of the ways in which a stateless diaspora was able to rely on protection from state powers and build business opportunities in the absence of official government backing (p. 106). When the Tuscan authorities could not offer the Jews the diplomatic protection and support structures needed to operate in the Ottoman Empire, French consuls in Aleppo played an indispensable role for the Sephardim of Livorno to trade in the region. Sephardi influence in the Eastern Mediterranean, in other words, developed in conjunction with the commercial and diplomatic initiatives of the French Crown. Trivellato's research also proves that Sephardi merchants never acquired a dominant position in the Levant trade in the eighteenth century, as it is often believed – rather, an analysis of French consular statistics shows that Venetian and Livornese Sephardim controlled about 12 to 30 percent of the overall French trade with Aleppo.

The second half of the book, in chapters 6 through 10, explores the blend of social, legal, and discursive strategies that the Sephardi traders mobilized to enforce uniform norms of business conduct, ensuring that Jewish as well as foreign agents be reliable and trustworthy. Even in the absence of the mediation of a centralized legal system early modern strangers were able to trade together. While Trivellato readily recognizes that the existence of commercial networks and kinship bonds allowed Sephardi merchants to recruit their business agents primarily from members of the same diaspora, it becomes evident that solidarity and trust were not automatic by-products of membership in the Sephardi group.

By turning to those routines, shared by eighteenth-century businessmen across religious and ethnic boundaries, which generated reliable expectations about commercial behaviors, *The Familiarity of Strangers* provides a fascinating history of the ways in which trust and credibility were constructed in the early modern period. Common norms regarding business contracts and a highly effective system of reputation control, which operated within all merchant groups, prompted uniform and regular behaviors that allowed for cross-cultural trade, Trivellato suggests. At the local level, mechanisms of internal discipline enforced by the lay leaders of the Livornese Jewish community not only increased its standing vis-à-vis the Christian authorities, but also aimed at strengthening Sephardi mercantile credibility in the eyes of Christian merchants. Such disciplinary measures, together with the informal pressure exerted by relatives and peers, were instrumental to check suspect members as well as to advance the collective reputation of Jews in the marketplace (p. 167).

The reputation of distant, Jewish and non-Jewish agents, on the other hand, was forged primarily through epistolary contacts. In an exemplary chapter that skillfully combines recent turns in cultural and economic history, Trivellato demonstrates that business correspondence allowed for the creation of an international "Republic of Merchants." Business letters, it turns out, circulated needed information not only on market prices and fluctuations, but also on the reputation of individual business agents and their solvency. Epistolary exchanges grew into essential tools of credibility check and safeguard for early modern merchants. It was through business correspondence that Ergas and Silvera, as well as many other traders like them, built lucrative networks of commercial relations that went beyond their immediate familial and ethnic group (p. 176). The highly ritualized etiquette of business letters, which consistently invoked "friendship" and "God" no matter whether the recipient

was Jewish, Christian, or Hindu, turned strangers into familiar associates, while building a discourse of economic and social trustworthiness across ethnic and religious borders (p. 192). As is well demonstrated by the case of the exchange of Mediterranean coral for Indian diamonds, one of the market niches in which Sephardi Jews were most prominently involved, "the shared conventions of letter-writing combined with the customary norms of maritime law and the intensive circulation of information about the merchandise's quality, prices and availability created effective informal and semiformal governance institutions that prompted even agents who were incredibly distant geographically and culturally to abide by their promises" (pp. 239-240).

Finally, Trivellato asks what happened when customary norms, social pressure and a cosmopolitan etiquette of business letter writing failed to ensure that contacts and obligations be enforced. Early modern merchants were wary of turning to formal venues of justice, such as Jewish or secular courts, in order to resolve conflicts with their partners and agents. Customarily this was seen as a last resort. Only once did Ergas and Silvera become embroiled in a court case. Significantly, the drawn-out legal proceedings and the inability to receive satisfaction in court against a Persian Jew who had betrayed their trust and proven himself an unreliable agent brought about the firm's bankruptcy.

The breathtaking scope of Trivellato's research is matched by the skill with which she weaves together multiple regional and historiographical foci, the exacting precision of her prose, and the theoretical sophistication that she brings to the material. Throughout the book, thoughtful comparisons with other diasporic merchant groups (such as Armenians and Huguenots) offer insights that illuminate the early modern world well beyond the Ergas and Silvera firm.

Most significantly, Trivellato's judicious interpretations provide a corrective to existing

assumptions that ethnic sameness “naturally” leads to ethnic loyalty. Challenging widespread notions held by anthropologists and Jewish historians alike, Trivellato demonstrates clearly that intra-group business solidarity was not automatic. All the more so, kinship did not automatically engender trust among early modern Sephardi Jews. She persuasively demonstrates that membership in the Sephardi diaspora, while it certainly facilitated the establishment of bonds of trust among merchants, did not ensure their persistence. It was calculative attitudes, including the notion that an agent’s competence and reliability is more important than his belonging to the same kinship group, which informed the business decisions of Ergas and Silvera (p. 146). Self-interest was the motor of early modern trade, the book suggests: for Sephardi businessmen, an agent’s reliability, personal credit, and experience were assets prized more highly than kinship. In other words, “experience and individual credibility mattered more than religious affiliation” (p. 16). Proven incompetency could severely challenge commercial ties with one’s family members, while insolvency tested familial and ethnic allegiance (p. 265). This important conclusion debunks a romanticized vision of ethnic solidarity too often a-critically accepted and reiterated.

Similarly, against optimistic and superficial generalizations, Trivellato argues that mercantile cosmopolitanism did not automatically bring about increased tolerance toward Jews among the business agents whom the Sephardim relied on (let alone the general Christian population). True, during the age of mercantilism, Jewish merchants were allowed to settle in various European regions and offered generous privileges on utilitarian grounds, as the case of Medicean and Habsburg Livorno so well demonstrates. And yet, successful and profitable cross-cultural trade did not lessen, and in fact fully coexisted with, corporate divisions and engrained power relations that encroached on social and economic interactions in the early modern period. Jews and non-Jews

who traded together, in sum, did not necessarily develop mutual respect (p. 146).

To conclude, this is a rich work that contributes to, and challenges, a variety of scholarly fields – economic history, early modern history, and Jewish history. Trivellato expertly succeeds in putting Jewish and European history in dialogue and offers an inspiring model of what a truly global and mature Sephardi history can achieve.

Francesca BREGOLI

Queens College of the City University  
of New York

### **Robin Vose**

*Dominicans, Muslims, and Jews in the Medieval Crown of Aragon*

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In *Dominicans, Muslims, and Jews in the Medieval Crown of Aragon*, Robin Vose challenges the entrenched assumption that medieval Dominicans made a concerted effort to persecute and convert Muslims and Jews. He traces the roots of this traditional narrative to the writings of early modern Dominican historians who were eager to establish the missionary credentials of their order, and, through the meticulous analysis of primary sources, he shows that Dominicans in the medieval Crown of Aragon actually aimed primarily to protect and nurture the faithful. A welcome corrective to a historiography that has drawn highly selectively from the medieval Dominican past, Vose’s erudite book is an important contribution to the study of mendicant history, the religious and political history of the Crown of Aragon, and the history of relations between medieval Christians, Muslims, and Jews.

Among the greatest strengths of *Dominicans, Muslims, and Jews* is its careful reconstruction of the development of the Dominican Order in the medieval Crown of Aragon – no small feat given the fragmentary nature of extant documentation. As part of this discussion, Vose details the daily realities of Dominican life, stressing the small size of the order in the medieval Crown, and showing that friars tended to be conservative educators and disciplinarians who understood their apostolic mission “first and foremost [as] an internal campaign aimed at ensuring that [Christians] received truth and avoided error” (58). By establishing this broader institutional framework, Vose shows that engagement with non-Christians constituted a minor part of friars’ activities and that friars who expressed interest in external mission – such as Ramon of Penyafort and Ramon Marti – were exceptional.

Vose also reassesses key episodes that have been interpreted as indicative of a systematic Dominican missionary project. For example, he demonstrates that the famous *studia linguarum* at which Dominicans allegedly were to learn Hebrew or Arabic for missionary purposes were short-lived, controversial within the order, and attended by very few friars. Over a period of sixty-two years, at most twenty-two Dominicans are known to have studied Arabic, and only eight friars were assigned to study Hebrew, all in the year 1281. As Vose rightly concludes, there is simply no evidence of “a deliberate, widespread, and long-lasting network of Dominican Hebrew and Arabic schools” (115). Moreover, Vose also suggests that, insofar as a handful of friars did learn these languages, their intent was not necessarily conversionary. Dominicans in the Crown of Aragon could have used Arabic to communicate with local Christian sects, such as Jacobites, Nestorians, and Maronites, and knowledge of Hebrew was often pursued in this period to better appreciate the *Hebraica veritas* of Scripture.

Vose also reconsiders the Barcelona Disputation of 1263, which traditionally has

been understood as an effort to secure Jewish conversions and showcase missionary techniques, such as proving the truth of Christianity on the basis of Jewish texts. Vose shows not only that this elaborate event was unusual and that it had little lasting impact beyond a brief preaching campaign by the Jewish convert Pablo Christiani, but also that proselytism was not its chief purpose. On the basis of the records left by Jews and Christians, Vose convincingly argues that the disputation was fundamentally about “the defensive teaching of theological truths to Christian audiences,” as its organizers recognized that “carefully managed displays of orthodox doctrine triumphant over infidelity...had profound value for the edification of Christians” (135).

Vose’s arguments regarding the absence of an organized medieval Dominican missionary program are compelling, and his book fulfills his aspiration of contributing “to a more balanced and historically accurate account of the complexities surrounding inter-religious contacts in the Middle Ages” (17). However, in the process of recalibrating understandings of medieval Dominicans’ interactions with Jews in particular, Vose sometimes minimizes evidence that might complicate his analysis. A case in point is Vose’s treatment of Dominican involvement in the inquisitorial prosecution of Jews. Vose acknowledges that “Dominicans in the Crown of Aragon did occasionally take steps to [...] prosecute non-Christian blasphemers and to ensure that all parties [i.e., including Jews] involved in cases of apostasy were duly punished” (167). He also concedes that “at times these episodes led to formal inquisitorial tribunals” (*ibid.*). He stresses, however, that “there were strict limits to mendicants’ legal ability to proceed against non-Christians” (*ibid.*), that “Dominicans could do little more than denounce culprits to royal authorities and hope for action” (15), and that “Dominican disciplinary actions had a [lesser] effect on...Jews...than has sometimes been supposed” (167).

Here, Vose might have expanded his discussion of cases of Dominican inquisitorial prosecution of Jews and converts to include evidence from earlier in the thirteenth century (for example, the 1265 investigation of the Jewish convert Berenguer Durand by Pere Cadireta and the 1284 investigation of the Jewish *aljama* of Barcelona) and later in the fourteenth century (such as the investigations conducted by Nicolau Rossell in the 1350s and the involvement of Nicolau Eimeric in prosecuting Jews during the 1360s and 1370s). His analysis also might have placed greater emphasis on the extent to which theoretical impediments to judging those *qui foris sunt* failed to deter Dominicans from prosecuting Jews, as inquisitors understood the bulls *Turbato corde* and *Contra cristianos* as establishing their authority over Jews who were suspected of re-Judaizing converts. In addition, Vose could more clearly have characterized Dominican inquisitors and kings as constituting competing spheres of power in the medieval Crown of Aragon, as Peter the Great, James II, Peter the Ceremonious, and John I each, at times, attempted unsuccessfully to stop inquisitors from harming “the royal treasure.”

Finally, Vose could have dwelled at greater length on the consequences of Dominicans’ actions. Fourteenth-century Dominican inquisitors not only exiled and imprisoned Jews, confiscated Jewish books and property, and imposed crippling fines on Jewish communities, but they also fanned Christian fear and hatred of Jews. Inquisitorial investigations of Jews could be high-profile affairs. The *sermo generalis* at the conclusion of a trial that unfolded between 1341 and 1342, for example – during which Bernat de Puigercós fulminated against the Jewish defendants for having caused two Jewish converts to Christianity to return to the “accursed life of damnation” and “abominable perfidy” of the Jews – was attended not only by the archbishop of Aix-en-Provence, the vicar of Barcelona, the bishop of Barcelona, five members of the city council,

canons of the city, and other prominent clerics and legal experts, but also by a great multitude of townspeople.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the sermons that Dominican friars sporadically preached to Jews during the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries incited Christian onlookers to harass and humiliate Jewish audiences. Dominicans’ primary goal may well have been to edify Christians. In the process, however, they sometimes acted to the great detriment of Jews.

Through its holistic approach to Dominican activities in the medieval Crown of Aragon, *Dominicans, Muslims, and Jews* paints a vibrant portrait of a diverse society in flux. Students of medieval history will benefit greatly from reading this revision of the notion that there existed a grand “thirteenth-century dream of conversion,” as well as from Vose’s lucid presentation of the previously obscure history of the Dominican order in northeastern Iberia.

<sup>1</sup> See Josep PERARNAU I ESPELT, “El procés inquisitorial barceloní contra els jueus Janto Almuli, la seva muller Jamila i Jucef de Quatorze (1341-1342),” *Revista Catalana de Teologia* 4 (1979), 309-353; 347, 352.

Paola TARTAKOFF  
Rutgers University