Symbolic Clothes
Marginality and otherness of Jews and New Christians as Reflected by Their Dress in Two Christian texts

Nadia Zeldes, The Hebrew University, Mandel Institute for Jewish Studies, Jerusalem, Israel

ABSTRACT: Clothes in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period denoted legal status and social standing. Jews (and other minority and marginal groups) were distinguished by clothing regulations, sometimes supplemented by the wearing of a special badge. However, beyond custom and law, there were subtle cues that signaled marginality such as the wearing of certain fabrics and colours etc. In Mediterranean Europe, that is in Italy, Sicily and the Iberian kingdoms, Jews wore more or less the same fashions as the surrounding society though there were restrictions and distinguishing marks imposed by either the ruler and the Church or the Jews themselves. A text from fifteenth century Sicily describes the clothes worn by Jews during a festive procession; but beyond the explicit information it provides, the text’s language and the subtext hint at the marginality and restrictions imposed on the Jews. Converting to Christianity meant, according to Church doctrine as well as missionary propaganda, total status change and no restrictions on dress, exercising various professions etc. However, a sixteenth century text - also from Sicily - raises intriguing question as to the perceptions of the New Christians by the Old Christian population, especially regarding dress. I would like to analyze both texts, comparing them to each other and to other sources from the same period.

This presentation is for the following text(s):
- A History of Sicily in Twenty (parts)
- On the Origins and History of Palermo
Symbolic Clothes
Marginality and otherness of Jews and New Christians as Reflected by Their Dress in Two Christian texts

Nadia Zeldes, The Hebrew University, Mandel Institute for Jewish Studies, Jerusalem, Israel

Clothes in the Middle-Ages and the Early Modern Period denoted legal status and social standing. It was customary in this period to impose the wearing of distinctive marks on members of marginal groups, such as Jews, lepers, prostitutes and heretics, to differentiate them from normative Christians. A special Jewish badge, a piece of yellow or red cloth to be worn on the outer garments, was imposed by the Fourth Lateran council in 1215. In Sicily, it was the red circle (rotella rossa), described by Rabbi Ovadia de Bertinoro in his account of his visit to Palermo in 1487.

In Mediterranean Europe, that is, Italy, Sicily, Provence and the Iberian kingdoms, Jews wore more or less the same fashions as the did Christians. They did not dress in this manner solely because they were allowed to (in fact, they sometimes chose to disregard discriminating laws), but because they chose to do so. Although they were living on the margins of Christian society, the Jews accepted its values and attempted to emulate them; rich individuals wore clothes that befitted their status, and so did wives and daughters of wealthy men. According to Pierre Bourdieu: “the dominated class came to see itself only through the eyes of the dominant class, that is, in terms of the dominant definition of the body and its uses. This having been said, in this area as in so many other and equally important areas which are not politically constituted, there is no realistic chance of any collective resistance of the effect of imposition that would lead either to the valorization of properties stigmatized by the dominant taxonomy (the ‘black is beautiful’ strategy) or to the creation of new, positively evaluated proper-group (always liable to relapse into shame), or the individual effort to assimilate the dominant ideal which is the antithesis of the very ambition of collectivity regaining control over social identity”

But that is exactly why both the surrounding Christian society and Jewish leadership attempted to control clothing. Rabbis and community leaders, aware of the dangers the Jews incurred whenever they wore clothes that were not suited to their station, attempted to enact sumptuary regulations were not always faithfully followed, as in the following petition from 1490 addressed to the authorities by the Jews of Palermo:

You have recently informed us with due reverence, that some Jews, men as well as women, dress with exaggerated pomp without giving consideration to their status, and they presumptuously put on luxurious clothes, wear silk pieces, and even adorn themselves with jewels that are not suitable for Jews, [all of] which leads to the destruction of this Giudecca, and their presumption is still growing... we give you full permission and allow you to freely hold council and impose your laws and regulations regarding the clothes of the Jews of this

162
Giudecca, men and women, as well as other rules necessary for living in peace and harmony.

The mentality of the age regarding Jewish clothing is reflected in Salomon Ibn Verga’s Shebet Yehuda in the imaginary dialogue between the king (Alfonso) and the Jews:

If you are slaves and exiles why are you dressing like princes? It provokes jealousy and hatred and I have ordered that in my kingdom you are not to wear silk... and and the Jews answer: As for the silk, from the day it was decreed, no man of ours dared defy it, and we, who represent the wealthiest of your people (that is: the Jews), are wearing cheap black garments although it is customary to come to the king’s palace richly dressed...

Converting to Christianity meant, according to Church doctrine, total status change and no restrictions whatsoever on dress, on the exercise of various professions, etc. However, conversos found guilty of heresy suffered a number of restrictions: banishment from certain professions and positions of honor, they were forbidden to ride horses, to dress in silk and wear red, their children could not inherit their property and more. Among the punishments and restrictions imposed by the Inquisition on reconciled heretics, was the wear of a special garment, the infamous “Sanbenito”, an upper garment with a stitched transverse cross that identified the wearer as a penitent, and often as a Christian of Jewish stock. The Spanish Inquisition decreed that penitent conversos (reconciliados) should wear sanbenitos at the pronouncement of the sentence during the Auto de Fé ceremony, and later the same garments were hung up in the local church. According to Henry Kamen, in his book The Spanish Inquisition, hostility to this practice was shared by Old and New Christians alike. The penitential garments worn in public by the condemned caused public humiliation not only to the individuals but also to the towns where they lived. The same rules applied to Sicily in the period under discussion. In the late fifteenth century the kingdom of Sicily was ruled by Ferdinand the Catholic, and then by his grandson, Charles V. The Spanish Inquisition was established in Sicily in 1487 but began its effective activity against converts of Jewish origin only in 1500 and continued up to 1550. Records show that 195 persons were burnt in person and 276 in effigy during the whole period. The total number of reconciliados is difficult to ascertain, but the number of individuals processed by the Spanish Inquisition in Sicily was slightly over 2,000.

New Christians, neofiti in Sicilian sources, fully participated in economic activity, worked in close proximity to Christians, sometimes were even elected as members of town councils. They daily clothes were virtually undistinguishable from those of Christians of the same social status. In other words, nothing in daily contacts marked New Christians as a group apart to be noticed on first sight. In fact, the wear of a penitential garment as punishment for heresy was introduced by the inquisition in southern France. Francoise Piponnier in her book Dress in the Middle Ages cites a fourteenth century source that mentions the punishment of a Cathar who was ordered by the Inquisition to wear two yellow felt crosses sewn over his clothing for the rest of his life. However, the wear of penitential garments was an innovation in Sicily, introduced by the Spanish Inquisition and it is possible this measure was misunderstood by the local population. In fact, the first Auto de Fé celebrated in Palermo in 1511 drew large crowds but those were not necessarily hostile to the accused. The description of an eyewitness leaves the impression that many pitied them. Moreover, a petition addressed by the Sicilian Parliament in 1514 protested against “abuses of power”, “excesses” and illegal use of torture by the Inquisition. The Spanish Inquisition was for most Sicilians a foreign
institutions and its measures encountered opposition on almost every level, including the imposition of penitential garments on condemned heretics. The reasons given against this particular inquisitorial practice (in the following text) are curious but in my opinion, they express a general feeling that forcing heretics to wear the cross was “un-Christian”.

Now I would like to come to the texts presently under discussion. The first is a historical work written in the second half of the fifteenth century by a Sicilian Humanist, the Dominican Pietro Ransano. In this text Ransano describes the clothes worn by the Jews of Palermo during a festive procession celebrating the marriage of Ferdinand and Isabella, stressing the fact that the Jews were on this occasion permitted to wear what they pleased and use precious fabrics such as silk; beyond the explicit information it provides, the text’s language and the subtext hint at the marginality and restrictions imposed on the Jews in everyday life.

The second text, an excerpt from The History of Sicily by Tommaso Fazello, another Sicilian Dominican, is concerned with the penitential garments, sanbenitos, imposed by the Spanish Inquisition on the New Christians who wore them during a religious sermon given in Palermo in 1516, after the expulsion of the Jews. The sermon coincided with the unrest that followed the death of Ferdinand the Catholic.

I would like to analyze both texts, comparing them to each other and to other sources from the same period. A point of interest is the fact that Fazello was familiar with Ransano’s work, and that is perhaps why his own later text echoes the former.

Endnotes

[1] There are numerous examples in medieval imagery, Christian as well as Jewish, of Jews wearing fashionable garments, see: Mendel Metzger, Jewish Life in the Middle Ages, New-York 1982.


וַהֲזַהֲלוֹלֵתְּנָא וַהֲזַהֲלוֹלֵתְּנָא וַתַּהֲזַהֲבֵּתָנָא וְתַהֲזַהֲבֵּתָנָא, אִם לְמָה תַלְבֵּשׁ בֶּגֶדִים שֵׁרֶם. מָאַמ שָׁוָהוּר לַא 'שִׁמַּעַת בִּמְלָכְתָּה שָׁוָהוּר לַא 'שִׁמַּעַת בִּמְלָכְתָּה שָׁוָהוּר לַא 'שִׁמַּעַת בִּמְלָכְתָּה שָׁוָהוּר לַא 'שִׁמַּעַת בִּמְלָכְתָּה שָׁוָהוּר לַא 'שִׁמַּעַת בִּמְלָכְתָּה שָׁוָהוּר לַא 'שִׁמַּעַת בִּמְלָכְתָּה שָׁוָהוּר L"


A History of Sicily (1560)
An Introduction

Nadia Zeldes, The Hebrew University, Mandel Institute for Jewish Studies, Jerusalem, Israel

Description of a riot that took place in Palermo in 1516 shortly after the death of King Ferdinand the Catholic. During the period of political uncertainty that followed the king’s death, a friar gave a sermon inciting the crowds against New Christians wearing penitent garments imposed by the Inquisition. In the text the New Christians are identified as Jews (Hebrews) and their wear of penitential garments, although imposed by the Inquisition, is perceived as a sacrilege. In other words, the preacher an the populace do not consider them heretics but Jews, and as Jews they should not wear a cross, because they crucified Christ. The riot that ensues attacks both the wearers of the penitential garment and the Inquisition who imposed it. Later in that year the crowds attacked the Inquisitor General and forced him to leave Sicily. The penitents, however, must have perceived the garment as a punishment, shameful and disgraceful. In fact, inquisitorial records show that in later years many Sicilian “reconciliados” did not adhere to the restrictions and paid fines for wearing red clothes, riding horses and bearing arms as they were reluctant to lose their status in society. In fact, the text under discussion shows that the penitential clothes worn by the New Christians (Hebrews?) represented different things for different groups.

Publication:
Tommaso Fazello’s history of Sicily, written in Latin, was first printed in 1558, in Palermo titled: De rebus siculis decades duae, Johannes Mattheus Mayda et Franciscus Carrara, Palermo, 1558. Two years later a second edition was printed in Palermo, this time with corrections of the errors that appeared in the first edition: De rebus siculis decades duae, Johannes Mattheus Mayda et Franciscus Carrara, Palermo 1560. The text presented below is an excerpt from this edition. A third sixteenth century edition,
slightly different, is titled: *De rebus siculis, Rerum Sicularum Scriptores*, Francoforti ad Moenum, 1579.

Contemporary and modern translations:

**Endnotes**


**Bibliography**

Bonfil, Roberto (1976), "Aspects of the Social and Spiritual Life of the Jews in the Venetian Territories at the Beginning of the 16th Century" [Hebrew], *Zion* 41, pp. 68-96.


Lagumina, Giuseppe and Bartholomeo (1992), Codice diplomatico dei Giudei di Sicilia (originally published: Palermo, 1884), Palermo: Società siciliana per la storia patria, Vols. I-III.

Renda, Francesco (1997), L’Inquisizione in *Sicilia*, Palermo: Sellerio editore,.


— (2003), The Former Jews of this Kingdom. Sicilian Converts after the Expulsion (1492-1516), Leiden: Brill.
— The Last Multicultural Encounter in Medieval Sicily: A Dominican Scholar, an Arabic Inscription, and a Jewish Legend”, Mediterranean Historical Review 21 (2006), pp. 159-191.

Copyright © 2012 Early Modern Workshop
On Emperor Charles the Fifth, king of Spain and Sicily, [in Sicily] second king of this name.

Charles, grandson of Emperor Maximilian, having been born to his son Philip, and of King Ferdinand the Catholic born to his daughter Joanna, the first of this name in Spain, but second king of this name in Sicily, acceded to the throne together with his mother Joanna at eighteen years of age. Charles was born in Belgium in the city of Gand on the 25th of February in the year of grace 1500, on the feast day of St. Matthew the Apostle. Thus, on the death of Ferdinand the Catholic of the Aragonese dynasty, Spain and Sicily came under the sway of the most prosperous family of rulers of the German nation of Austria.

The viceroy of Sicily at that time was Hugo de Moncada, a man of Valencia, and (as has already been said) of the Order of St. John,[3] who, knowing of the king’s death, hid and concealed it, fearing that the people would rise against him while he was seeking the approval of Charles, the new king. Because of his charge, which he exercised for six years while Ferdinand lived, he was disliked by certain nobles, and they, hearing of the king’s death, took advantage of the situation and used it as a pretext to call for the legal cessation of the viceroy’s appointment, and secretly incited the Palermitan mob against Hugo who, according to custom, had to remain in its proximity. The mob, hearing of the king’s death from another source, also began to suspect Hugo, and the riots soon spread throughout Palermo. Calcerando de Rocha, also a Spaniard, whose house was near the Piazza Marina,[2] had an extraordinary prophetic vision that presaged these riots, which later spread throughout Sicily. In fact, a few days earlier, when Ferdinand was still living, a little before sunrise while he [Calcerando de Rocha] was still lying in his bed, he saw a great crowd rioting in the nearby area. Running quickly to the window he seemed
to see a vision in the uncertain shadow beyond, at first a great mass of men who seemed to be foot soldiers, then a group of warriors armed with lances and shields, then troops of horsemen and soldiers, running to the royal residence where Hugo lived, assaulting and rushing it. At first light he went to Hugo and told him, almost breathlessly, all that he had seen. At about the same time, many said that they had seen armed soldiers moving at nighttime on the summit and at the foot of Mount Pelegrino.[3] But Hugo, having heard all that, said that these were only the dreams of sick people.

Once they heard of the king's death, the people of Palermo began to murmur throughout the city that Hugo's magistracy was over. The party of the people was supported by Pietro Cardona count of Collesano (who was discussed above), Federico Abbatelis count of Cammarata, Girolamo Filangeri count of San Marco, Simone Ventimiglia marquis of Geraci, Matteo Santapà marquis of Licodia, whose father Hugo had beheaded; Giambatista Barresi, lord of Militello and Guglielmo Ventimiglia lord of Ciminna. And thus, these men and many other Sicilian nobles who were envious of Hugo, were going about saying that with the king's death his appointment was null and void, and that Sicily should be governed by Jacopo Alliata as vice-justice.[4] And in order to decide on the matter, they left Palermo leaving the mob restless and tending to break into new riots. Together with other nobles of Sicily who supported their cause, they convened in a tower that overlooks the tavern of Mirto. Having decided and agreed on a course of action, they departed for Termini Imerese on the pretext that they had to mourn the dead king and perform the funerary rites in the great church [of that place], since Hugo refrained from celebrating them in order to conceal the news [of the king's death].

Hugo found the nobles' departure intolerable, and because he was hurt by this indignity more than necessary, he decided to surrender to popular furor and leave Sicily. But because his departure would have allowed the people to riot against the king, and the new king would have held that against him, his supporters, Antonio de Moncada count of Adrano, together with his brothers Ferdinando, Luigi and Federico, as well as Giovanni Luna count of Caltabellotta, councilors to the royal court, convinced him to remain in Sicily. Thus, sustained by his supporters, the viceroy quickly convened the royal council with their help.

While Hugo Moncada was doing these things, Girolamo da Verona named Barbato of the Order of the Hermits, who during Lent delivered sermons before the people assembled at the church of St. Francisco in Palermo, and, though it is uncertain whether he acted out of his own initiative or because he was urged by the notables, he frequently incited the crowd against the Jews,[5] who shortly after being initiated into holy Christianity, hastened to secretly return to Mosaic law. For this reason the inquisitor had sentenced them to various punishments, among which was the wearing of a green habit with a red cross sewn on it. [Da Verona] raised his voice and exhorted the crowd to strip off the cross, since it was a sacrilege for those who crucified Christ to wear a cross.
When the sermon was finished, the crowd, inflamed by these words, fell upon the Jews, men and women, of whom there were many in Palermo at the time, and tore their outer garments\[6\] to pieces.

Fortified by this initial sedition, in the counts’ absence and lacking restraints, the people in their entirety continued to ask for Hugo’s resignation from the magistracy. But Hugo, once he was aware of this, did not lose heart and together with the Senate and the city officials, who supported him, in order to maintain the loyalty of the people, he rode through the most rebellious parts of the city to prevent further uprisings. In vain did he abolish a recently imposed flour tax that greatly afflicted the city people in order to placate popular furor. But the people continued to clamor for his resignation from the magistracy upon the king’s death, according to the law.

**Endnotes**

\[1\]The knights Hospitallers.

\[2\]Overlooking the Piazza Marina is the Palazzo Steri, at that ime the residence of the viceroy of Sicily (later it was the seat of the Holy Office of the Inquisition). In the sixteenth century the square was very large and empty of buildings and was also used for state ceremonies and public executions.

\[3\]A steep mountain rising above the city of Palermo to the west.

\[4\]According to the law then in force in Sicily, in the absence of a viceroy, or on his death, the kingdom was governed by a local high official until a new viceroy’s appointment.

\[5\]Hebrews, in the original.

\[6\]In the Latin: amictu= toga, upper garment, a covering.

Copyright © 2012 Early Modern Workshop
DE CAROLI QUINTI CAESARIS HISPANIAE ET SICILIAE SECUNDO HUIUS NOMINIS REGE.

CAROLUS MAXIMILIANI CAESARIS PHILIPPO FILIO, ET FERDINANDI CATHOLICI REGIS EX IOANNA FILIA NEPOS, IN HISPANIA PRIMUS, SED IN SICILIA HUIUS NOMINIS SECUNDUS REX, ANNUM AGENS DUODEUAGESIMUM CUM IOANNA MATERE SUCCESSIT. NATUS FUIT CAROLUS GANDAUI, CIVITATE BELGIICA ANNO SALUTIS 1500, DIE 25 FEBRUARII, QUI DIES EO IPSO ANNO FESTUS DIVO MATTHIAE APOSTOLI FOELT. ITA DEFUNCTO FERDINANDO, EX ARAGONUM STIRPE HISPANIA, ET SICILIA IN FAUSTISIMAM GERMANICAE NATIONIS AUSTRIAE DUCUM PROSAPIAM VENERUNT. PRAETERAT PER ID TEMPUS SICILIAE REGIS NOMINE HUGO MONTECATINUS VALENTINUS GENERE, RELIGIONE (UT DIXIMUS) IOANNITA, QUI COGNITAM REGIS MORTEM, NE PLEBS IN EUM ALIQUID MOLIRETUR, DISSIMULATERAT, CELAVERATQUE ET INTEREA A CAROLO NOVO REGE APPROBATIONEM SOLICITABAT.

VERUM SUM MAGISTRATU, QUEM SEX CIRCITER ANNOS VIVENTE FERDINANDO ADMINISTRATERAT, PROCERIBUS QUIBUSDAM ESSET INVISUS, ILLI AUDITA REGIS MORTE OCCASIONEM NACTI, PRAETEXTU MAGISTRATUS EXTINCTI, PLEBEM PANORMITANAM APUD QUAM DE MORE HUGO DEGEBAT, OCCULTIS ARTIBUS CONTRA HUGONEM CONCITARUNT. PLEBS QUOQUE CUM REGIS MORTEM ALIUNDE RESCISSET, SUO ETIAM MOTU HUGONEM SUSPECTUM HABERE, ATQUE MOX TUMULTIBUS PANORNEM REPLERE CAEPIIT. INGENES HOS SICILIAE MOTUS, QUI POSTEA SECUTI SUNT, CALCERANDUS ROCHENSIS HISPANUS ET IPSE GENERE, CUUIS IN AREA MARITIMA AEDES ERANT, PORTENTOSA VISIONE, ATQUE MIRO OSTENTO PRAESAGIVIT. NAM PAUCIS ANTEM DIEBUS VIVENTE ADHUC FERDINANDO CUM SUB PRIMAM LUCEM IN LECTULO VIGILARET, MAGNAM HOMINUM MULTITUDINEM IN AREA PERSTREPENTEM AUDIVIT. AD FENESTRAM OCYUS ACURRIT, VIRONUM FREQUENTIAM PRIMUM, PETITUMQUE SPECIES, MOX HASTATOS, SCUTATOSQUE SUEQUI, AC EQUITES DEINDE IN TURMAS DIVISOS, ARMATORUMQUE ACIES IN PRELJ SPECIEM CUNCURRENTES IN REGIAM DOMUM, QUÁ HUGO UTEBATUR, IRRUERE, AC OPPUGNARE OCULIS PER INANUM UMBRAM
Publisher: Unknown

Endnotes

Copyright © 2012 Early Modern Workshop
On the Origins and History of Palermo
An Introduction

Nadia Zeldes, The Hebrew University, Mandel Institute for Jewish Studies, Jerusalem, Israel


Description of the festivities in Palermo by Pietro Ranzano (1428-1492).
Originally written in Latin, Ranzano’s treatise on the history of Palermo was titled: De auctore primordiis et progressu felici urbi Panormi. It was part of a larger work, a general history of the world: Annales Omnium Temporum (uncompleted and never published). A version of the original Latin text and its translation into the vernacular is housed in Palermo, Biblioteca Comunale. The Latin version was printed twice in Palermo during the 18th century, first by Stefano Amato in 1737, and then as part of the ninth volume of the collection Opuscoli di Autori Siciliani, 1767. The vernacular version was published by Gioacchino Di Marzo together with another contemporary text Delle origini e vicende di Palermo di Pietro Ransano e dell'entrata di re Alfonso in Napoli (Palermo: Giovanni Lorsnaider, 1864).

The text in question describes the festivities and procession held in honor of the marriage of Ferdinand and Isabella: pp. 50-54. My premise is that the overt text that repeatedly tells the reader about the exceptional permission given the Jews to freely dress as they wished hints at the underlying narrative that reassures the reader that this was indeed an exception, and the Jews usually dressed according to their humble status, that is, they did not wear silk and fine cloths. Another interesting point is that only men and youths participated in the celebrations whereas women watched from windows and doorsteps. Jews took part, as did the rest of the male population, albeit at the end of the procession.
Bibliography
Bonfil, Roberto (1976), "Aspects of the Social and Spiritual Life of the Jews in the Venetian Territories at the Beginning of the 16th Century" [Hebrew], Zion 41, pp. 68-96.
Lagumina, Giuseppe and Bartholomeo (1992), Codice diplomatico dei Giudei di Sicilia (originally published: Palermo, 1884), Palermo: Società siciliana per la storia patria, Vols. I-III.
Renda, Francesco (1997), L’Inquisizione in Sicilia, Palermo: Sellerio editore,
― (2003), The Former Jews of this Kingdom. Sicilian Converts after the Expulsion (1492-1516), Leiden: Brill.
― The Last Multicultural Encounter in Medieval Sicily: A Dominican Scholar, an Arabic Inscription, and a Jewish Legend”, Mediterranean Historical Review 21 (2006), pp. 159-191.

Copyright © 2012 Early Modern Workshop
On the Origins and History of Palermo
Delle origini e vicende di Palermo
1471

Translated by Nadia Zeldes, The Hebrew University, Mandel Institute for Jewish Studies, Jerusalem, Israel

[explanatory additions appear in brackets]
In that year, Isabella, sister of King Henry of Spain, a young maid of singular beauty who surpassed all others in her nature and manners, full of virtue, was married to Ferdinand son of John, king of Sicily and the Aragonese, whom I have mentioned in my previous book. And for that reason, the Sicilians, having been notified by a letter sent by Ferdinand, celebrated the event with grand festivities, lighting fires and making many other displays that were a pleasure to see, rejoicing and marking [that day] with great happiness and singular joy. And having said enough about these things in a few words, as indeed I have regarding other things already mentioned in the previous books, [I wouldn’t have written it] were it not for the persuasion of my contemporaries, and in particular that of my brother Antonio Ransano; rebuffing them seemed to me a vile thing, [therefore I shall describe it] in such words and praise that demonstrate the manifest happiness with which the Palermitans celebrated this joyful announcement.

At that time the mayor[i] of Palermo was Pietro Spetiali (Speciali), who was the first man in the public administration of the city of Palermo. He was not only strong of heart, generous of nature and a great defender of the homeland, but also the wealthiest man that could be found among the Sicilian nobles. And he had authority not only over the Palermitans, but also over every Sicilian. He always strove to acquire the support of any man whomsoever, at times by a certain generosity of the heart, at times with grandeur, so this it greatly benefited the city of his birth and its citizens, and other people of his own land, and close friends. Moreover, in part because of his splendid [financial] condition, he was almost always the benefactor in every negotiation. Had he lived in another era, he could have ruled Sicily[3], dispensed his wealth in many public works.

But how many more words are necessary to state his praise and glory? And what more is
there to say, when already three years ago, he built at his own expence a magnificent bridge over the Solanto river, two miles distant, in the place where in the past, many drowned every winter because of the rising waters. And this year, with much love and care he undertook the repair of the public roads in the city he is the mayor of, and many houses of the wealthy citizens were exceptionally\[4\] embellished. He built a beautiful marble chapel for the church of San Francisco and adorned it with splendid works of art, and beautified it marvelously with precious gifts. He is now undertaking to fortify the city with new walls and beautiful towers and other necessary fortifications.

This was the man to whom the viceroy of Sicily, His Excellency Lopez Ximenes De Urrea (of worthy faith and virtue, of whose loyal service to the king of Aragon and Sicily many things have been told above), sent a letter from Messina ordering him [the mayor] to issue instructions so that the people and our men of Palermo would demonstrate their joy at the happy news of that marriage. This Pietro did [many deeds] and gave orders to do many great things and hold many celebrations above and beyond his instructions. And having first discussed his plans and ideas with the city fathers whom the Sicilians name “iurati,” they unanimously approved and praised all that he planned to do. First, he gave orders, before anything else, to perform the divine service with great care and solemn pomp. Thus, he ordered that a great procession be held on the last day of November, the day Christians celebrate the feast of Saint Andrew the Apostle. He gave orders to convene the citizens and people of every estate and condition at that church of this saint in order to render grace and give thanks to immortal God according to custom. He also instructed all citizens to do their utmost, and that each of them everything possible, to adorn all roads and streets and buildings that were on the route the priests and clerics would pass dressed in sacred and precious vestments, chanting hymns and lauds and devotedly praise the eternal God. Thus, it was decided to cover the walls of buildings and parts of the public roads with beautiful cloths, and each and every one did his duty according to his own means and condition. The roads and the doors were decorated with the branches of green trees, leaves and flowers of trees that never lose their greenness. And for this reason it appeared as if one were walking through a beautiful and pleasant garden.

Having finished with things divine with these orders, the mayor gave instructions to make preparations for the organization of such things and beautiful spectacles that were appropriate to the manifestations of joy, gaiety and celebration by the whole city. The circumference of Palermo is approximately five thousand feet and it is surrounded by a beautiful, high, and wide wall so that it appears almost square in form. Taking this into account, the mayor ordered that every eight feet or at every eighth battlement, there should be posted a barrel of the kind customarily used by the Palermitans for wine keeping and he recruited a large group of youngsters well versed in this secret to fill them with dry and parched wood and to light them all at once at the first hour of the night, when given the signal. He also ordered that all the city dwellers in every part of
the city, in all the streets of the city, should light torches and candles before or above their houses, or at the windows, and to demonstrate their happiness and their joy with shouts and gay songs, with loud sounds and in every other decent and honest manner. Everyone readily and joyfully obeyed the mayor. And thus, at the right hour, many made fires in the barrels, others piled up wood, and others lighted torches or even lanterns, and so many lighted such bright fires in every part of the city that it seemed that they had vanquished the darkness of night. And so God willed it, that it was by Fortune’s favour that there was no wind that night. Were there by any chance a great wind, nothing could have been done by human counsel to prevent the entire city from burning down. But the stillness of the heavens was such, thanks to divine favor, that together with the mayor’s foresight it appeared that nowhere was there any danger to be feared.

A few days earlier, two large French galleys, that often traded in the ports of many noble cities, stood in Palermo’s harbor. Their masters, having seen that there were such big celebrations in the city, decided to light fires and organize festivities as did the citizens. And so did other shipmasters of the vessels that stood in the harbor. And at the same time that the Palermitans started their fires and torches, the shipmasters started theirs. Also the royal houses and palaces lighted their fires and so did the two castles of Palermo, the one situated at the entrance to the port, and the other at the end of the city, facing west. It was judged as a most beautiful spectacle, and perhaps the best ever seen in our times. And it appeared most marvelous to those who watched it, either from the seashore or from the landside: it appeared to them as a great crown of fire and light. The whole city reverberated from the shouts of men, the clamor of artillery, the sound of trumpets and the ringing of the bells.

In addition to these things, the mayor also ordered torches prepared that were in fact ornamented wax candles. According to many who were present [at the celebrations], there were about two thousand [candles and torches]. And the mayor gave orders that the most honorable citizens, and especially those who held worthy office in the city, should ride on horseback, and by evening they had gathered in the place the Palermitans called The Pretorian Court. Having done that, he ordered that each one carry his own lighted torch and they arranged themselves according to rank, riding two by two, making their way with grand pomp and circumstance through the most famous streets, places and palaces of the city. The number of citizens that rode horses and mules in this procession was around one thousand and four hundred. And thus, each man of every order and condition, took part in the merriment, and again, by order of the mayor, all members of the various nations that inhabited Palermo, Catalans and Majorcans, Aragonese and Valencians and people hailing from other parts of Spain, formed a procession and joined the citizens, all riding on horseback, carrying a lighted torch, and demonstrating great joy and merriment. The Jews, a large number of whom was living in Palermo, were also ordered to merrily follow the procession, each carrying his own candle or torch, and on his orders they walked closely behind the citizens. The mayor
allowed them unrestrained freedom in that time of celebration in the city and gave them full permission to wear any kind of footwear or clothes they wished, and [told them] that they could use anything they thought or knew to be appropriate to honest merrymaking, as they pleased. And so, they chose from among them four hundred youths who were dressed in precious garments, even made of silk, some singing, some whirling, some dancing (cui ballando, cui danczando), some playing new games and playacting [to represent fashionable] personages, following behind the large, ordered group of Christians.

It was a great joy indeed for all who stood in the streets to watch such a new and lovely celebration conducted in such an orderly manner. The women looked out gaily from the windows and doorways of their houses at the lights and burning torches, and at the pomp and joyful applause and festivity that was proceeding through the streets and in such order. Little boys playing childish games before their parents’ houses showed reverence for the nobles, who, as it has already been said, were passing through the city. Pilgrims, or in truth all kinds of foreigners and strangers who were staying in Palermo, a great many of them stood before the places and houses in which they lodged, saw the things we have described above, and many of them decided to bring pieces of wood and candles for the celebration, and they too immitated all that the people of the city were doing. And in this manner they kept vigil for half the night until the candles were spent in order to make merry and celebrate. And for that, although it took but little time, it was neither a small quantity nor a puny sum of money that the city and its people spent. And all that in order to demonstrate the real and true love, sincere fidelity, and worthy honor for the exalted royal crown and his excellence, his majesty of Aragon.

Endnotes

[1] In that period the mayor of Palermo was known as “pretore”, from the Latin “praetor”. He was also in charge of the police force and the urban courts of justice.
[2] *La republica Panhormitana*, meaning public affairs, going back to the original meaning of the Latin expression “res publica”.
[3] Sicily was at this time a subject kingdom, ruled by foreign viceroys appointed by the kings of Aragon. One of Speciale’s ancestors was the first and only Sicilian viceroy. Ransano expressed here the secret wish of the Sicilian elites for autonomy.

Copyright © 2012 Early Modern Workshop
**EARLY MODERN WORKSHOP: Jewish History Resources**

**Volume 4: Jewish Consumption and Material Culture in the Early Modern Period, 2007, University of Maryland**

**Delle origini e vicende di Palermo**

*On the Origins and History of Palermo*

**C 1471**

Prepared by Nadia Zeldes, The Hebrew University, Mandel Institute for Jewish Studies, Jerusalem, Israel

In questo anno la virginetta Ysabella, de bellieza unica, soro de Enrico re dela Spagna, la quali avanzava a li altri di costumi et natura, ornatissima di virtuti, fu coniugata cum Ferdinando figlio di Ioanni re di Sicilia di li Aragoni, de lo quali fichi mentioni ne lo libro superiori. Et per quista cosa, essendo stata per liceteri notificata a li Siciliani da Ferdinando, ipsi, cum festività grandi, cum luminarri et multi altri spettaculi iocundi a vidiri, si fichiro et significaro grandi leticia et singulari gaudio. Et haviria stato sufficienti cum poco palori (=paroli) in questo loco quista cosa peractari, cussì como multi altri cosi innanti su’ descripti in libri di supra scripti, non havissi stato costricto da la voluntati di multi mei contubernali et maximamenti di Antonio Ransano frati; a li quali repugnari mi paria cosa nephanda: di modo chi dimostririssi cum assai palori cum quali plauso, di leticia signo. Li Pahormitani hajano celebrato un tanto allegro nuncio. – Era in quillo tempo preturi Petro Spetiali, lo quali in la administracioni de la republica panhormitana in questa cita era primo. Ultra ch’era di animo forti et di mansueta natura, grandi defensuri di la patria, era infra li princhipi siciliani lo più richissimo chi si trovassi. Et non solamenti appresso li Panhormitani l’auctoritati di quisto valia, ma ancora appresso di qualunqua Siciliano. Lo quali sempri si isforzao actaparisi lo favuri di qualsivoglia homo, parti cum una certa mansuetudini di animo, parti grandimenti, chi fachia grandi beneficii a la patria et a li chitatini et altri conterranei et propinqui. Et ultra di questo, parti per la sua condicioni di la quali multo resblendia, era quasi in omni negocio summamenti pruvidituri. Et cui si voglia subsequenti, chi in alcuna età haia tenuto imperio in Sicilia, la opera fidili di quillo in multi cosi ha usato. Ma che necessario più palori dispendiri in laudi et gloria di ipsu? Cumsocia cosa chi quisto fu quillo, chi, ja si fa tri anni, a sua propria spisa magnificamenti edificao lu ponti supra a quillo fiumi distanti di Solanto a dui miglia, in lo quali, multo crixendo per li aqui di la pioja chi in ipsu concurrino onni tempo di verno, soliano li tempi passati multi homini.
piriri. Et in quisto presenti anno cum onni diligentia et studio dà ricapito et cura chi li
vii publici di la chitati, di la quali è preturi, et li casi di multi opulenti chitatini sianu
eximiamenti exonerati. Havi edificato di belissimo marmo una nobili cappella in la
eclesia di san Francisco, et havila cum sbrenduri di artificiosa opera et di preciusi duni
mirificamenti illustrato. Dà ancora ricapito chi la citati si fortifichi continuamenti di
mura novi et turri bellissimi et altri necessarii propugnaculi. A quisto adunca, a tali
homo, mandando soi licteri da Missina lo zll. (=eccellenzia) don Lupu Ximenes d’Urrea
vicerè di Sichilia (de la spettata et probata fidi et virtuti et fidili opera de lo quali verso li
re de Aragona et di Sichilia su’ stati da mi multi cosi di supra narrati); per li quali licteri
chi comandao chi dassi ordini chi lu populu et li nostri homini di Palermo divissiro
mostrari alcuna allegricza per la leta nova di lo dicto matrimonio. Multo majuri cosi et
festa ipsu Petru fichi et ordinao chi non li fu comandato. Et, comunicando primo lo
consiglo et deliberacioni sua supra li cosi chi si havia immaginato di fari cum li patri di
la chitati li quali da li Sichiliani su chiamati li Iurati; et approbando et laudando quilli
unanimiter tuctu czo chi ipsu havia disposto fari, primo lo ordina chi cum sollepní
pompa et intentissima cura si facza principio da li cosi divini. Ordinao adunca chi si
facza una grandi processioni in l’ultimo di lo misi di novembro, in lo quali jorno si
celebra da li cristiani la festa et sollemnpati di santo Andria apostolo. A la clesia di
quisto sancto comanda chi dijano conveniri li chitatini et altri homini di omni stato et di
omni ordini per rendiri gracci secundo la usanza di cristiani a lo immortalí Deu. Fa
ancora publicamenti bandiari et comandari chi tutti gitatini usasiro omni diligentia, et,
quantu fussi ad omniuno possibili, si sforzassiro ornari tutti li vii et li strati et palaczi per
li quali li sacerdoti et homini religiusi, vestiti di sagri et preciusi vestimenti, havissiro
ordinata menti da passari, cantando hymni et laudi et devotamenti referendo laudi a lo
eterno Dio. Facendo adunca chasquiduno lo suo debito, dectiro prestamenti ricapito chi
li mura di li casi di la parti di la publica via si coprissero di belli panni, quantu fu ad
omniunu secundo la sua condicioni et facultati possibili. Li vii da omni banda et per li
porti di li casi et in terra foro parti rami tagliati di li virdi arbori, parti di frundi et fiuri di
quilla specia di arbori chi mai perdino la sua viriditati. Per si facto modo foro ordinati
chi paria ad omni uno passijari intro bellissimi orti et amenissimi jardini. Cum tali
ordini, poi chi fu factu finij a li cosi divini, ordina lu preturi di fari apparichiari per farisi
quilli cosi et belli spettaculi, li quali appartinissiro a temporali alligriza et jocunditati et
festa di tutta la gitati. Havi Palermo di circuitu circa chincomilla passi, et è circundata
tutta di bellu, latu et altu muro per modo chi fa pariri la chitati quasi in forma di
quadrangulo. Ordinao adunca lu preturi chi supra tutto lu muro di la chitati, tutta
intorno in omni octo passi oy veru in omni octo merguli fussi posta una butti, di quillí
czoè li quali solino usari li Panhormitani a conservari lu vino: et commisi ad una grandi
brigata di juvini apti a quisto misteri, chi li implissiro di ligni aridi et sicchi, et a la prima
hura di la nocti, quandu alloro fussi fatto signali, li divissiro allumari et darili foco tutto
in uno mumento. Item comandao chi li chitatini in tutti parti et lochi per li vii di la
chitati, innanti oy supra li loro casi, oy veru per li fenestri, divissiro fari in quillo
sequendo et portando ogniuno lu so lumi oy vero intorchi, per ordini andassiro appresso li chitatini. Fichi alloro lu preturi libera potestati, et dettili plena licentia, chi in tanto applausu de la chitati putissiro usari ogni maynera quali volsiro di calciamenti et di vestimenti, et, chi a loro beneplachissi, putissiro usari tucto quillo chi sapissiro excogitari et pensari, puro chi fusi cosa la quali ad allegriza honesta appartinissi. Et cussì circa quatro chento juveni intra di loro eletti, vestuti di preciusi vestimenti et maxime di sita, cui cantando, cui ballando, cui danzando, cui fachendo alcuni belli et di novo trovati jochi et personagi, sequitaro la grandi et ordinata compagnia di li cristiani. Summa era la letitia di tutti quilli chi stavano a vidiri per li strati tali ordini et mayneri di belli et novi festi. Li donni pe li fenestri et per li porti di li casi loro allegramenti stavano a vidiri l'ordini di li lumi et intorchi allumati et la pompa et applauso gaudio et festa di quilli chi intanto ordinatamenti per li strati passavano. Li garzunecti innanti li casi di li parenti loro letamenti fachianu varii jochi puerili, fachendo reverentia a li nobili, li quali como è stato dicto, per la chitati andavano. Li pelegrini, oy veru li furisteri et straneri si trovaro in Palermo, gran parti di loro cum admiracioni et gaudio standosi innanti li lochi et casi, in li quali eranu allujati, guardavanu li così supra narrati; et multi di li altri dectiro ricapito di haviri ligni et lumi per fari festa ad imitari onni di czo chi fachia tutta la chitati. Et in quisto modo vigliando per fini a la meza nocti, fu facto fini a li luminarii, a la allegriza et a la festa. Per la quali, benchi durassi per tanto poco tempo, fu nondimino consumata da la chitati et da chitatini particulari non pichiula quantitati nè poco summa di dinari: et tutto per mostrari lu rectu et vero amuri et sincera fidelitati et digno honuri a l'alta Regia Coruna et excellentissima majestati di Aragona.

**Publisher:** The original fifteenth century text exists in manuscript form (not consulted). It was edited and published in the nineteenth century: Giovanni Lorsnaider, Palermo 1864

Copyright © 2012 Early Modern Workshop