

Nelson Novoa, James W., *Being the Nação in the Eternal City. New Christian Lives in Sixteenth-Century Rome*. Portuguese Studies Review Monograph Series, vol. 2. Peterborough: Baywolf Press, 343 pp., 2014. ISBN: 9780921437529.

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Once again, the study of the world of *conversos* in early modern Iberia has demonstrated its enormous potential. With this book, Professor James W. Nelson Novoa, currently undertaking research at the University of Ottawa, fills a number of gaps in the historiography. First, because up to now there has been a notable lack of studies centered specifically on the New Christian Portuguese community in sixteenth-century Rome. Secondly, because his analysis goes far beyond questions of ethnicity and religion.

All too often, the study of *judeoconversos* both in and beyond the Iberian Peninsula has relied over-heavily on Inquisition sources. Clearly, this documentation is fundamental, but it still remains only partial. This has meant that attention has been focused on only a small segment of this minority. In some cases, this has happened through convenience, and, in other cases, as a result of a particular—and, I believe, excessively reductionist—historiographical perspective, though I shall not comment further on that here. We might say that we have not been able to see the *judeoconversos* for the *Judaizers*. Fortunately, things have moved on in terms of the historiography of this minority population of the Iberian Peninsula. James Nelson's book constitutes a welcome step forward in the study of Portuguese *conversos* who chose to live in Rome either temporarily or permanently, in diverse situations, and for varied reasons.

It is precisely by exposing the complexity of the New Christian group in Italy, and the diversity of ways in which *converso* identity was lived, that this book makes its most important contribution. The methodology, and the structure used, are the two pillars that make this possible.

The historiographical analysis is based on a sound knowledge of the relevant scholarship in this area, but also on a systematic and rigorous use of primary sources. The author makes use of abundant original archive material, but his approach, involving constant cross-referencing of data, avoids falling into an overly positivist trap. The varied

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provenance of the source material is especially noteworthy, drawing on libraries and important European archives in Lisbon, Simancas, Rome, Parma, and Florence. Some of the unpublished documents are presented in a documentary appendix.

The book consists of two main parts. The first three chapters provide the reader with context, giving meaning to the mosaic of case studies that are presented in the six following chapters, in the form of mini-biographies.

The book is therefore able to set out, in a consecutive and meaningful way, the roots of the Iberian *judeoconverso* phenomenon, the significance of the Jewish and New Christian communities within the framework of the economic expansion of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe, and finally the fascinating human landscape of contemporary Rome.

The city which King Ferdinand of Aragon called the “plaza del mundo” contained an enormous foreign population. It was a city of nations, each recognized as having their own entities and identities, including not only the Spanish and Portuguese “nations,” but also the *nação cristã-nova*.

From time to time in this book, Rome takes on an active role, behaving almost as an agent rather than as a mere backdrop. The development of financial, mercantile, diplomatic, and artistic activity around the Holy See throughout the sixteenth century is, without doubt, a key factor in understanding the presence of this minority in the papal city.

Individually, the case studies would not be representative of the totality of the Portuguese *converso* community in Rome, but together they help us to reconstruct the complex puzzle that this constituted. Among the dozens, or hundreds, of possible examples, those chosen by the author are especially illustrative, notable without being exceptional, and they also allow for diachronic analysis.

Duarte de Paz (Chapter 4) is perhaps the best known of the Portuguese *conversos* brought together here. His biography is the first in the series and, at the same time, the earliest. He is the figure who is closest to the first generation of *conversos*, illustrating their expectations and interests.

Diogo António follows in Chapter 5, typifying a character that was common in Rome at this time: the *converso* cleric with a legal background, involved in all sorts of business around the Curia, from legal matters to business surrounding the financing of apostolic letters, and acting as an intermediary. Although a less well-known character, he is perhaps the figure that is the most broadly representative of this period.

Chapter 6 is dedicated to Diogo Fernandes Neto, a Portuguese businessman with a Jewish background, based in Rome and in contact with the Society of Jesus. The development of his situation is a good reflection of the Portuguese New Christian community in Rome.

The merchant banker Jacome da Fonseca and the physician Pedro Furtado, like many others, settled in Rome to escape persecution by the Inquisition. Chapter 7 examines the two lives in parallel. Both are magnificent examples of the diverse paths that the Diaspora took: on the one hand, exile to the Levant and a return to Judaism; on the other hand, the attraction of other parts of Italy and the promise of security.

Moving forward in time, António da Fonseca (Chapter 8) represents a financier who was perfectly integrated into the Portuguese community. He was an active banker who collaborated with the powerful company run by Simón Ruiz, and provided credit both for individuals and for the Crown. He was Governor of the Portuguese community of Sant'Antonio dei Portoghesi and his heirs became members of the local elite. António da Fonseca provides an example of a business man who adapted to the new times of what was, in the words of Thomas Dandeleit, "Spanish Rome." The fact that he built a chapel in which to be buried in the very Church of San Giacomo degli Spagnoli is a good indication of his integration.

Finally, and closely related to Fonseca, we find Dr. António Pinto (Chapter 9). A cleric and the grandson of Jews condemned by the Inquisition, he was to be successful in accumulating a large number of ecclesiastical benefices for himself. Both he and his son-in-law became agents of the Crown, under both the House of Aviz and the Hapsburgs. Pinto represents another case of reinventing the past as a means of social advancement and, as the last example in terms of chronology, he ends the series of case studies.

The book does not deal with the roots of the *converso* phenomenon or with the dynamics of integration or rejection *per se*. Clearly it mentions these roots, but its focus is on the second generation, which is the common denominator of the whole work and of the individuals highlighted. This allows the author to focus on the variety of ways in which the sons and grandsons of converts from Judaism lived their identities. The book presents firstly a group of lives marked in one way or another by public recognition of belonging to the *nação*, and then a series of others who chose to hide their origins. The book does not attempt to analyze the well-known mechanisms of social rejection (I do not need to cite the extensive literature on inquisitorial persecution, purity of blood statutes, etc.) or the less

well-known routes to social assimilation; however, the life histories it describes offer up some interesting details.

The chronological framework allows the author to deal with the period both before and after the dynastic union between Spain and Portugal. It is also true that, although some aspects of these lives reflect the repercussions of the Hapsburg accession to the Portuguese throne, we know that, beyond politics, there were already strong links in existence before 1580. This makes sense for various reasons. One might ask whether it would be correct to extrapolate similar conclusions for the following century in the years after the separation.

Markets and banks, Judaism and the Inquisition, clergy, diplomacy, patronage, social advancement, identity, the search for justice, the disguising of origins, rejection, assimilation ... all these make up the landscape of this book. The style makes for easy reading, something that is not always a feature of academic writing. It is also worth mentioning that there is a useful glossary of unusual terms. Beyond the study of the physical lives that it presents, the book sets out to refocus attention on this diverse minority as a group. A multiple perspective was the only way of “exemplifying the complexity”—as the author says—of this kaleidoscopic reality, and this is the book’s great strength.

I hope this book will serve to stimulate further studies of this minority in early modern Rome, which are much needed. Few social groups achieve such a multiplicity of dimensions (social, economic, religious, political) or such a level of transversal significance vis-à-vis other areas of research. Few lend themselves to so many other historiographical approaches. In my opinion, *Being the Nação in the Eternal City* already constitutes a key reference.