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Research Project:

The Jews in Candia (1350-1550): a socio-cultural history through archival and literary documents

Thanks to the work of S. D. Goitein, the Cairo Genizah has long been recognized as the principal document repository for the study of the Jews in Mediterranean area (and beyond) during the Fatimid and the Ayyubid period (969-1250).

The same recognition has not yet been granted to the enormous documental corpus concerning the life of the Jewish communities of Crete and all over the Eastern Mediterranean during the years 1204-1669 that is to be found in the Venetian Archives, the Vatican Library and other libraries located worldwide. Albeit geographically less far-reaching than the Genizah documents, this corpus does not suffer from the fragmentariness that often taints Genizah documents and does not fall short of it in vastness and variety.

Crete (or Candia, as it was called at that time) became part of Venetian dominions overseas as a consequence of the Fourth Crusade (1204) and was ruled by the Serenissima until 1669, when the island was conquered by the Ottomans. Jewish life in Crete predated the Venetian conquest and continued unceasingly throughout the 450 years of Venetian dominion and beyond. Starting with the second half of the XIV century, Jewish immigration from the Iberian peninsula, Italy, France and Ashkenaz turned the originally exclusively Romaniote Candiot Jewish quarter into a melting-pot where different cultural traditions encountered together and gave life to an economically and culturally prosperous and lively community. Thanks to the production of Jewish wine and cheese, and the flourishing leather and tanning industry, the Jews of Candia developed a thriving commerce not only with Venice but also with ports of the eastern Mediterranean such as Constantinople, Alexandria, and Tripoli (Siria). The aristotelian philosopher Elijah Delmedigo (d. 1492/3) and the Rabbi and chronicler Elijah Capsali (c. 1485-1550), two of the most prominent literary figures from Venetian Candia, were born in two of the wealthiest families of the city.

The Archives of the Duca di Candia (the title assigned to the Venetian governors of the island), now stored in the State Archives in Venice, preserve an overwhelming amount of administrative, juridical and notarial documents which, if thoroughly studied, would allow us to depict fairly in detail the history of the Jews in Candia and their social and economical life throughout the whole period of Venetian dominion. As far as Jewish life in Crete is concerned, these collections have already received the attention of Zvi Ankori, David Jacoby, Benjamin Arbel and other scholars. Still, only the surface of the extant documentation has been scratched.

The same holds true as regards the investigation of Jewish cultural life in Crete. Between 1539 and 1541 an unknown buyer acquired in Candia some one hundred and fifty Hebrew manuscripts. This collection was later to become part of the Palatine Library in Heidelberg, which was donated to Pope Gregory XV in 1622. In 1623 the Hebrew manuscripts from Candia entered the Vatican Library, where they are now stored. This collection probably represents the widest collection of Medieval and early modern manuscripts ever to be assembled from one single community and then

preserved intact in one single library. A masterful study of this collection has been offered by Umberto Cassuto, whose untimely death yet prevented him from investigating it in its full scope.

The purpose of my PhD thesis (which I am going to submit in June 2015 and discuss in August-September 2015) has been to identify the Hebrew manuscripts that were produced and read in Crete in the XIV-XVI centuries on the basis of a cross-analysis of internal evidence contained within manuscripts (colophons; notes of ownership; contracts of sale; paleographical evidence etc.) and the historical data on Cretan Jewry during the period of Venetian domination provided by the documents preserved at the State Archives of Venice.

The purpose of the research-project that I would like to conduct now also lies at the crossroads between these two documental corpuses. Its aim would be to produce a monograph in English on Jewish immigration to Candia and its cultural effects – from the transmission of Sefardic and Provençal medical lore to Candia to the formation of a peculiar Machzor showing influences from the Ashenazi and French Machzorim, from the impact of Tosafistic tradition on the local *minhagim* to the transmission of philosophical and astronomical knowledge from Constantinople to Candia. Among the questions I would like to address are the following: who were the immigrants? Where did they come from? Why did they settle in Candia? Which activities did they engage in? How did they interact with the local population? How did the latter react to their arrival? The idea I would like to verify is that the scientific and cultural lores brought by these immigrants fostered the curiosity and the admiration of the local Jews and thus helped to give shape to a thriving encounter. The time-span covered would be from 1350 (when the first immigrants from Spain begin to appear in archival documents) to 1550 (the year of Eliyyahu Capsali's death, which ideally marks the end of the Candiot "golden-age").

The study would be based on the documents already published (see bibliography), the archival documents I have been gathering during the preparation of my thesis, and the Hebrew manuscripts I have identified as originating from Candia. Working in the Sourasky Library at Tel Aviv University would ensure me access both to secondary literature on the history of the Jews in the Mediterranean world and on Jewish liturgical texts often difficult to find outside the borders of Israel. A one-year sojourn in Tel Aviv would allow me to spend some time at the Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts, located in the National Library of Israel, Jerusalem, where I could gather the material I do not dispose of yet. This project would like to be a novel attempt at bringing together social history and cultural history.

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