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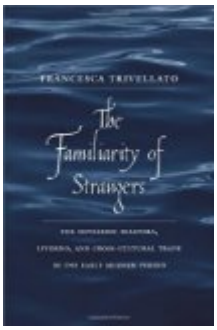

Francesca Trivellato. *The Familiarity of Strangers: The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009. 488 pp. $50.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-13683-8.

Reviewed by Dean Phillip Bell

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Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

Reevaluating the notion of cross-cultural trade as traditionally applied to Jewish traders and other trading diasporas, Francesca Trivellato argues that the interactions produced by such trade could lead to innovations, but might not dissolve corporate boundaries, develop individualism, or create more tolerant attitudes. Questioning assumptions about early modern insularity, Trivellato notes repeatedly that membership in the far-flung Sephardic Diaspora could facilitate but did not guarantee trust or cooperation in long-distance trade. Rather, relations with a range of Jewish and non-Jewish agents, evolving legal norms, and reliance on a network of information helped to guide business activity.

Trivellato examines a group of Sephardic merchants as they settled in the Tuscan port city of Livorno in the 1590s and as they became active in trade throughout the Mediterranean and the European Atlantic. These merchants conducted business with a range of agents that included family, friends, and strangers. As Trivellato compellingly notes, "Sephardic merchants built commercial solidarities across ascriptive categories of collective identities and in many cases did so by circumventing legal proscriptions" (p. 4). Trivellato considers both how family and communal organization affected business dealings with other Sephardim, coreligionists and non-Jews, but she also pays careful attention to the development of general legal norms and social systems that "rendered expectations more predictable and created the necessary incentives for cooperation among strangers" (p. 4).

The focus of the volume is on the early eighteenth century. Taking both a macro and micro approach, Trivellato utilizes as a key source the copies of more than thirteen thousand business letters written by two Sephardic families (Ergas and Silvera), whose business partnership spanned most of the first half of the eighteenth century and whose activities require discussion of conditions in Livorno and much further afield. Trivellato, therefore, begins with a careful genealogical reconstruction of the Ergas and Silvera families and the development of this central business part-

nership, as well as a broad discussion of economic and political conditions in Livorno.

By way of context, Trivellato provides a broad and quick overview of the history and development of the Western Sephardic Diaspora and the relationship of Jews there with other Sephardic communities and geographic areas, focusing on the settlement of Jews in Tuscany and Livorno in particular, which would become the second largest Sephardic settlement in the West after Amsterdam. Trivellato offers a valuable analysis of Livorno in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, stressing the city's diversity and simultaneous segregation as well as its "communitarian cosmopolitanism" (p. 73). Livorno, Trivellato asserts, was something of a social experiment, a new city constructed on "rationalist principles of the Renaissance," and particularly welcoming to foreigners and merchants, with specific concessions to Jews, who were thereby obligated to retain residence in Livorno (p. 73). Lacking the craft guild structure regnant in many other cities, Jews were free to engage in a range of retail sales and manufacturing in Livorno. Jews here were not confined in a ghetto nor prohibited from owning real estate, and the authorities forbade the forced baptism of Jewish children under the age of thirteen. Jews were also allowed to have a synagogue. Trivellato usefully places the experience of Jews into the broader context of relationships and changing composition of foreign nations in Livorno. In Livorno, as across the Western Sephardic Diaspora, a certain acculturation took place, often mimicking the culture of lower Spanish nobility (complete with coats of arms, for example). As in other Jewish communities, distinct social hierarchies prevailed, in this case with affluent Sephardic families in leadership positions (later challenged by Italian and North African Jews). Trivellato draws a rich and nuanced picture of the life and culture of such families.

Trivellato traces the rise and unique attributes of Livorno that positioned it to develop in the early modern period into the largest port of call and redistribution center of Mediterranean Europe. Livorno played a particularly significant role in connecting northern Europe and the Ottoman Empire. In part, Trivellato argues, this position was fostered by dogged neutrality, elimination of levies on import and export goods and significant privileges and toleration for foreign merchants and Jews. Increasingly as the role of the French government expanded, especially in dealings with the Ottoman Empire, Jews became more involved with French authorities, with, for example, Livornese Jews receiving increasing French protection in such key places as Aleppo. Despite practical waiving of legal impediments in many cases, Trivellato notes that any alliance between Western Sephardim and France did not ease social barriers or religious intolerance.

While Western Sephardim utilized the family firm as the central business model, Trivellato asserts that they were not thereby limited in serving a diverse clientele and they could work with a range of commission agents, with whom they had no personal ties. Trivellato here takes the opportunity to explore Jewish marriage patterns and related issues of dowries and inheritance, again in a useful comparative vein, which allowed for the possibility of raising money and transferring it to succeeding generations.

Trivellato next turns to the central source for this study--business letters. She notes that letters fulfilled four purposes: certifying contracts and property rights in court, allowing discussion about market conditions, providing information about the skill and reliability of associates, and serving as tools to maintain secrecy. Business letters in general drew from common practices and rhetorical norms, becoming increasingly formulaic in the early modern period (even as they were specific in content). Seventy percent of the 13,670 letters sent by the Ergas and Silvera families from Livorno were in Italian. Over 4,000 were in Portuguese. While Hebrew terms appeared in various

letters, only one letter was written in Hebrew, a fact Trivellato attributes partially to papal regulations against keeping ledgers and account books in Hebrew.

Trivellato provides an analysis of some of the more common words in the letters, including "friend" and "God." Comparing these letters with examples from the Cairo Geniza, Trivellato notes that business letters became more stylized and "gallant" over time. While not every aspect of this analysis is persuasive, the thorough evaluation of the sources is important and leads to some significant findings. Trivellato also traces the destinations of these letters, pointing out that the largest number went to Venice (over four thousand), not surprising given Venice's important role in trade, information, and manufacture. Large numbers of letters were also sent to Genoa, Florence, Amsterdam, London, Aleppo, and Marseilles. The destinations and focus of these letters' content allows Trivellato to offer comments about the nature of business as well as the selection of agents and business partners. Some of this analysis leads to intriguing observations. In Genoa, for example, Trivellato's protagonists often utilized the services of Christian merchants. In Amsterdam and London, they relied on the network of other Sephardim. While using the main destination points of the letters as a way to discuss a broad range of trade issues, Trivellato also notes that the Ergas and Silvera families focused on Mediterranean trade, unlike some of their coreligionists who were increasingly involved in the burgeoning Atlantic trade.

As a more targeted exemplar, Trivellato explores her subjects' interest and involvement in the trade of Mediterranean coral and Indian diamonds, two examples that allow her to sketch various trading and production patterns. Here she provides insightful comparisons with other groups, such as the involvement of Armenians, as well as observations about the changing fortunes of the Ergas and Silvera partnership itself. Trade in diamonds was an occupation that required global connections, and often cross-cultural engagement, and a high level of secrecy. It was risky business, and individual transactions might require years to complete.

In the end, this is a well-written and well-constructed study that utilizes an intriguing body of sources. It builds successfully on recent scholarship on aspects of early modern and Sephardic history, while providing some important correctives regarding the nature of early modern trade and culture and the development and functioning of trading diasporas. Trivellato successfully navigates between unique aspects of Jewish and Sephardic networks and societies and the broader developments within early modern Judaism and the various non-Jewish societies and polities in which Jews lived and worked. This volume will be a useful resource for scholars looking for intriguing sources and rigorous and creative scholarly methodologies. It adds important insights to a diverse body of literature on a growing range of aspects of early modern Judaism.

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