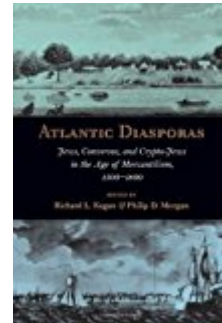


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Reviewed by Stanley Mirvis (CUNY- Graduate College)  
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## Jewish History Undergoes an Atlantic Makeover

Edited by Richard L. Kagan and Phillip D. Morgan, *Atlantic Diasporas* is a collection of essays based on a conference held at the Johns Hopkins University in 2005. As the subtitle makes explicit, the “Atlantic Diasporas” under investigation are that of the “Jews, Conversos, and Crypto-Jews,” collectively referred to as “La Nação,” “the Portuguese Nation,” or “the Western Sephardic Diaspora.” In the Dutch and English Atlantic, many members of the “Nation” openly identified themselves as Jews, while *conversos*, within the Iberian sphere of influence, lived as Catholics and some as crypto-Jews. What makes a study of the Portuguese Nation particularly fruitful in advancing the field of Atlantic studies is the far-flung and diverse nature of its mercantile activities as well as its, perhaps unparalleled, level of simultaneous religious fluidity and group cohesiveness.

As Adam Sutcliffe explains in his essay, a nation-based narrative has largely dominated Jewish historiography. In this traditional representation, Jews negotiate the political, cultural, and social contexts of a particular government or local population. It was not until the 1990s that emphasis shifted away from a nation-based narrative with the advent of a new “social-type,” the Port Jew, first proposed by David Sorkin and Lois Dubin. Port cities, dotting the Atlantic and the Mediterranean/Adriatic coasts, regarded their Jewish popula-

tions with an entirely unique set of interests informed principally by the need to stimulate trade and investment. As such, Port Jews are understood as agents of modernization independent of French emancipation or the development of Jewish Enlightenment (*haskalah*) in Berlin. And indeed, the “Port Jew” is Kagan and Morgan’s starting point. In applying an Atlantic studies model, they seek not only to bypass the centrality of the nation-state even further, but also to problematize the boundaries of ethnic and religious identity. Whereas previous studies of “New World” Jewry, such as the 2001 collection of essays entitled *The Jews and the Expansion of Europe to the West, 1450–1800*, still largely rooted the discourse in the nation-based model while placing Jews within the broader context of early modern colonialism, *Atlantic Diasporas* focuses on transformations to culture and identity unique to the Atlantic experience. As such, the contributors to *Atlantic Diasporas* are less interested in the particularities of the Dutch, British, and Spanish worlds, and more interested in how the Portuguese diaspora coalesced into a cohesive entity through the cultivation of hybrid-identity

The book’s contribution to the field of Atlantic studies is no less crucial. Approaching the Portuguese trading diaspora as a case study offers an opportunity for scholars in the still nascent field to clarify terminology

and set new parameters. As, again, Sutcliffe reminds us, the Sephardic trading diaspora challenges the Atlanticist who seeks to break down national, ethnic, and religious boundaries. Though the Sephardic trading diaspora embodied those characteristics that make the Atlantic a rich field of study, such as hybrid-identities and loose national affiliations, it also maintained important singularities. One question that pervades this collection is what makes the Portuguese Nation unique among other ethno-religious trading diasporas, such as the Huguenots, Quakers, and Scotts?

The volume is divided into three parts: “Contexts,” “Mercantilism,” and “Identity and Religion.” Jonathan Israel opens by detailing the historical development of the Sephardic trading diaspora. He identifies several crucial turning points. With the unification of Iberia in 1580, the Sephardic diaspora became a viable trading force throughout the Atlantic. Their prominence climaxed around the mid-seventeenth century with the Portuguese revolt against Spain and the Dutch and English diplomatic realignment with Iberia. By the end of the eighteenth century, the activity of the Sephardic trading diaspora declined precipitously along with transatlantic trade in general. For Israel, the singularity of the Portuguese Nation lies in its ability to transcend religious and political borders, writing that “no other diaspora could match the capacity of the Sephardic Jewish diaspora and its crypto-Jewish counterpart to cut across and link rival empires, trade systems, and confessional blocs throughout the western Atlantic world” (p. 4).

Sutcliffe—opening with the provocative question “are we all Atlanticists now?”—contextualizes a transnational Atlantic perspective within traditional Jewish historiography particularly addressing what he calls a “nation-based paradigm.” With an Atlantic perspective the prevailing categorization of Jewish societies along religious and ethnic lines disappears, leading Sutcliffe to suggest that “the very organizational category of ‘Jewish history’ is itself stretched and problematized” (p. 19). Though Sutcliffe embraces the promises of studying Jews as models of hybrid-identity and transnational cultural exchange, he is not quite ready to do away with *Jewish* history altogether. He warns of the dangers of over-comparison to the point of homogenization whereby any trading diaspora, especially one as multifaceted as the Portuguese Nation, is stripped of its singularities.

Section 2 begins with Wim Klooster’s analysis of the economic and ideological motivations behind the first Jewish settlements in the Dutch Atlantic. He frames his

discussion around individual seventeenth-century Jewish pioneers, including João de Yllán and David Cohen Nassi. Beyond their well-known economic goals, Klooster explores some of the more forgotten cultural impulses behind Jewish Atlantic settlement, arguing that Jewish “colonial entrepreneurs mixed commercial objectives with idealism” (p. 49). For instance, Yllán harbored clear messianic aspirations informed by his little-known encounter with Sabbatianism in Amsterdam.[1] Klooster also makes strides in situating early Jewish American settlement within the context of concomitant global Jewish upheavals and mass migrations.

Holly Snyder, looking at the merchant culture of the British Atlantic, aims to move past the mere identification and description of Jewish mercantile behavior. She seeks to comprehend “how ... Jewish merchants conduct[ed] effective trading operations within the broader scheme of British transatlantic trade” (p. 52). She compares two competing mercantile strategies. On the one hand, she examines Fernandes Carvajal and Rabba Couty who bypassed restrictive legislation against Jews through subversive trading strategies like sailing ships under different flags. And on the other hand, we have those who achieved success “playing by the rules,” such as Asser Levy and Aaron Lopez. Snyder concludes that the success of the latter should be attributed to their ability to transcend the established wisdom of exporting raw materials to Europe and focusing alternatively on buying high quality imports to serve a niche American market. Through the trade of high quality commodities, Jewish merchants sustained a strong customer base and tapped into an obsession with gentility in the fledgling North American colonies.

Daviken Studnicki-Gizbert seeks to understand how trading diasporas, spread out over long distances and in constant motion, maintained their group cohesiveness. His first task is to define the Portuguese trading diaspora through amalgamating *conversos* with practicing Jews into a single cohesive entity—*La Nação*. The *Nação* is characterized by its dynamic commercial interests as well as its “composite religious culture” made possible by a sense of shared exilic heritage (p. 76). He begins with the family. Like other trading diasporas, the Portuguese Nation was united through ties of kinship perpetuated by endogamous marriage practices, which, though not exclusively, formed the initial backbone of trust between distant trading partners. He finds that households among seventeenth-century trading diasporas did not conform to the “stem” or nuclear family models then predominant in other western European nations. Portuguese Nation

households were “agglutinates,” which included multiple branches of a family and transient members. Thus the seeds of trust and connectivity between distant trading partners were first sowed in the household.

In dialogue with Studnicki-Gizbert is Francesca Trivellato who approaches the question of cohesiveness among trading diasporas from an economist’s perspective. Trivellato endeavors to revise the “prevalent but problematic presumption that cooperation was an inherent feature of merchant communities and trading diasporas and to consider what really explains economic associations forged by coreligionists” (pp. 99–100). She argues that the equation of kinship with trust is overly determined. For Trivellato, kinship, though undeniably a critical component of group cohesiveness, was not the only or most reliable means by which bonds of trust were formed. Instead, she makes the case that historians must look to the full gamut of mechanisms that Sephardim engaged to reduce risk and maintain good reputations among far-flung trading partners, such as legal contracts, community regulations, and courts.

Part 3 begins with Bruno Feitler’s examination of Jews and *conversos* in Dutch Brazil, a particularly illustrative case study of the ethnic and religious fluidity characteristic of the *Nação*. In Dutch Brazil, a Jewish community was established in a place formerly occupied by the Portuguese along with many *conversos*; some were eager to be openly identified as Jews. In consequence, Dutch Brazil became a place of unprecedented porous religious boundaries both with regard to *converso* “rejudaization” as well as the less studied phenomenon of Jews reverting to Catholicism. Because of this religious ambiguity, openly professing “New Jews” were compelled to generate concrete definitions of who was, and who was not, a Jew. Feitler elegantly explores many of the theological debates surrounding this question.

Brazil, however, was not unique in this regard. David L. Graizbord, for instance, has demonstrated in his studies of the border lands in Southern France (*Souls in Dispute: Converso Identities in Iberia and the Jewish Diaspora, 1580–1700* [2004]) the extent to which religious fluidity was the norm between Jews and *conversos* on the European continent, particularly among habitual border crossers. Graizbord’s work calls into question the geographic scope of “Atlantic” hybrid identities. The Atlantic coast of Europe unfortunately receives little attention in *Atlantic Diasporas*.

Aviva Ben-Ur explores a change over time in the communal belonging of Eurafricans in the semiautonomous

Jewish community of Suriname. The initial presence of Eurafricans in the Jewish community suggests that Jewishness was determined through the male prerogative to convert their children of color. Ben-Ur argues, however, that after the late eighteenth century, Jewish identity in Suriname was increasingly seen as a “matriarchal matter.” New communal regulations de-racialized the status of *congregante* (inferior member of the community), which became associated instead with the sexual conduct of women rather than solely with racial distinctions. For instance, the second-class status of *congregante* was now reserved for individuals born from mothers not legally married. Over time, as more members of the Jewish community were born legitimately from women of color, their mothers took on “the pivotal role as determinants of community belonging” with an exceptionally influential role in the process of creolization (p. 169).

Peter Mark and José da Silva Horta explore the Jewish settlement in Senegambia, where Portuguese Old Christians, New Christians, and openly practicing Jews lived under Islamic rule. Deep religious tensions divided Jews and Catholics in the Petite Côte, especially over the issue of perceived Jewish iconoclasm. Despite a barrage of anti-Jewish sentiment from Catholics, the Islamic rulers of the Petite Côte—informed by the precedent of the *dhimma* pact (regulations on non-Muslim citizens) and their interests in encouraging trade—welcomed Jewish merchants. Furthermore, shared religious iconoclasm and rituals, such as circumcision, facilitated cooperation between Jews, the Islamic ruling elite, and the indigenous non-Muslim Senegalese population that also practiced male circumcision. Like Dutch Brazil, Senegambia offered an environment conducive to a high degree of religious flexibility where those of the *Nação* shuttled between Christianity and Judaism with relative ease.

Ronnie Perelis explores Antonio de Montezinos’s dramatic *Relación* (1644), the tale of a New Christian conquistador turned Jew through the guidance of his crypto-Jewish Indian guide Francisco in South America. The *Relación* is well known as the inspiration for Menasseh ben Israel’s *Hope of Israel* where it was reprinted in 1655. But Perelis, reading between the lines, presents the *Relación* as an autobiographical text. He reads the *Relación* not as it was intended in the seventeenth century for its millenarian implications but rather for what it reveals about the shadowy inner world of the crypto-Jew. Perelis also appreciates the *Relación* as a paradigmatic text illustrative of the plasticity of religious and ethnic identity in the Atlantic world. Through an inverted social hierarchy, Francisco, the slave, exerts control over Mon-

tezinós's process of return to Judaism. Montezinos and Francisco begin to see each other in themselves, both persecuted, both hiding their true identity, and both awaiting a future redemption when the hidden will become revealed: "what began as his Montezinos's ethnic and religious opposite, in a flash becomes his mirror image: 'These Indians are Jews!' He reads beyond the obvious markers of the Indians' difference and sees his own hidden identity reflected in the Indians' secret" (p. 205).

The volume concludes with Natalie Zemon Davis's epilogue offering a thematically unifying overview of the contributions while also pointing the way toward future

research. Davis's epilogue, coupled with Kagan and Morgan's preface, as well as frequent internal dialogue between the authors, all contribute to an admirable degree of internal cohesion and thematic unity. *Atlantic Diasporas* is well organized, fascinating, groundbreaking, and extremely useful both as a platform to promote further research and as an assigned text.

#### Note

[1]. Sabbatianism is the belief in messianic deliverance through Shabbtai Sevi (1626–76) that spread across the Jewish world during the second half of the seventeenth century.

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