Chapter Two

Between Scylla and Charybdis

The Aragonese Conquest

Jewish participation and implication in the Aragonese conquest of Sicily was negligible. Iucef Ravaya of Aragon, King Peter I’s bailiff or treasurer, was the only Jew of note known to have been involved in the campaign. He assisted the king in raising the necessary funds for the invasion, and accompanied him on the expedition to the island. There, Iucef administered the royal treasury, procured provisions and transport, and raised loans to augment the royal resources. He died in the middle of the war, at the end of 1282. King Peter evidently held him in high esteem and bestowed honours on him. Queen Constance, Peter’s widow, and Astruga, Iucef’s widow, kept in touch after their husbands’ deaths. When in 1294 Astruga was about to pay a visit to the Queen mother in Sicily, King James II recommended her to the officials on the island.

The Jews of Sicily probably suffered as much as the rest of the population at the hands of the warring factions during and after the landing of the Aragonese, although no details have come to light. That notwithstanding, among the descriptions of hardship and economic havoc of the time, no mention of Jewish involvement has so far surfaced. Some Jews at least must have taken sides and suffered the consequences. But we know of only one Migliorato, a Jew of Marsala, to whom King Peter restored his property of which he had been deprived, along with that of others. No reason is given. There were also a few instances of royal orders intended to protect the Jews from secular and ecclesiastical interference or oppression. One such order was addressed in 1283 to the syndics of the community of San Marco d’Alunzio, following representations of the local Jewish community,

1 For this and more, see my Introduction to Vol. I. Iucef died between 11 and 30 December, cf. Docs. 244–245.
2 Vol. 17, Addenda, p. 11788.
3 Doc. 240. Occasionally though, Jewish communities complain of hardship caused by war. See for instance Doc. 887.
instructing them not to overtax the Jews there. Another of the same year enjoined the secreti, master portulanì and procuratori across the river Salso (i.e. Western Sicily) to refrain from demanding of the Jews a higher price than agreed on for the purchase from the Crown of the revenues derived from the dyeworks in San Marco and Patti, and the baiulacione tax of the Jews there. Then in 1294, King James II entrusted the Jews of Sicily to the protection of Queen Constance and the Infante Frederick; following a petition by the Jewish community in Messina, the king informed the master iusticiario and officials of Messina that Franciscans and other friars preaching to the Jews to convert to Christianity must do so only in the synagogues. The preachers must not be accompanied by a mob (malandrinos seu vesanos). That policy was continued by King Frederick II in the fourteenth century. In 1308, the king intervened with the Serenissima on behalf of Iuda alias Leone Turtuvidi, a Jew of Syracuse. He had been murdered near Zara in Dalmatia, and the local count was holding the merchandise which the dead man had had with him. As a result, the Venetian authorities ordered the count to hand over the property to the murdered man’s widow and children.

The Fourteenth Century

However, soon the heavy hand of medieval Catholic discrimination against Jews made itself felt. In 1310 King Frederick published a constitution containing seven articles referring to Jews and, to a lesser degree, Moslems. They were: protection of converts from insults; prohibition of possessing Christian slaves; wearing of distinguishing clothes; abrogation of the invalidity of Christian testimony against Jews; prevention of familiarity, joint meals or service in Jewish homes; prohibition to appoint Jews to public office; and inhibition to Jewish doctors to cure Christians, or sell and administer medicines to them. Most were not new or particular to Sicily and some remained a dead letter. The constitution is based on a proposal by Arnau de Villanova, physician, alchemist, scholastic, mystic and would be reformer. He has been described as “an apocalyptic prophet” and was a supporter of the

4 Docs. 249, 250 (San Marco), Vol. 17, Addenda, p. 11787 (Queen Constance). For the gabella baiulacionis, see below. For the delimitations of the two Sicilian provinces citra and ultra Salsum, see Beloch, Bevölkerungsgeschichte I, p. 92.
5 Docs. 336, 338 (Iudas); Lattes, Mercatante ebreo siracusano, pp. 322f.; Ljubic, Monumenta 1, pp. 235f. At this juncture the hold of Venice on Zara was still tenuous. It became firm only after the Serenissima paid King Ladislas of Naples a sizable amount for the town and its territory (1409).