Jewish Settlements A to Z

When the Aragonese came to Sicily, the island was divided administratively into two zones by the river Salso. The eastern part, called ‘this side of the river’ (citra), and the western part, ‘across the river’ (ultra). But the division which became prevalent was that into three valleys: Val Demone, the North East; Val di Noto, the South East; and Val di Mazara, the South West. Jews lived in all three parts, particularly in the coastal towns, including the largest ones: Palermo, Messina, Catania, Syracuse, Sciacca and Trapani. Most other Jewish communities were grouped around the greater urban centres, and only a few were situated in outlying areas, but never totally isolated. Many of the inland ones were situated along the major line of communication. Most Jewish settlements dating back to earlier periods survived, some disappeared, and many new ones were established, particularly in the fifteenth century. Some were tiny and of short duration, until the expulsion. The trace of others has been lost. Only the family names of some Jews testify to places of origin regarding which no further evidence has surfaced.\(^1\) In addition to the geographically-administrative divisions, with well-defined continuous demarcation lines, there existed others, particularly that between the king’s domain and the territories of the feudal lords. These included the queen’s demesne (also a fief), centred in and around Syracuse, those of the barons,

\(^1\) See map 1. For geographical descriptions of Sicily, physical, general, etc., see Beloch, *Bevölkerungsgeschichte* I, pp. 153f.; Epstein, *An Island for Itself*, pp. 25f. I have not reported some localities for which no documentary evidence is available, although a Jewish presence is claimed by local tradition and the like. See, for instance, Limina, a village near Savoca, said to have harboured a sizable Jewish community. Cf. Chillemi, *La Giudecca di di Limina*, pp. 29f. See also his *Giudeche dei Nebrodi*, pp. 53f, which contains a long list of other localities supposedly linked to a Jewish presence at one time or another. While that cannot be totally ignored, it lacks support by documentary evidence. Another example is San Fratello. See Strazzeri, *Giudei di San Fratello*, pp. 647f.
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and of a few assorted others, such as Mazara owned by the rulers of Naples, Savoca by the Church, and so forth. Some of them were ‘permanent’ fiefs while others changed hands from time to time, and were dotted all over the country. Jews lived in most of them. Numerically, the majority of Jews lived in the king’s domain. In all, there were over 90 settlements, two thirds in the king’s domain and one third in the territories of the feudal lords. This situation had far-reaching consequences for the Jews of Sicily in more than one sense.

The Jewish population of Sicily was in continuous movement and generally speaking on the increase during the period under review. In addition to immigration from abroad, Jews moved from one place to another, causing some old and well-established communities, such as Catania and Monte San Giuliano to diminish considerably in size. At the same time, other communities, such as Palermo, Trapani and Sciacca, grew. New settlements sprang up or were developed largely thanks to the efforts of some of the barons, bringing the total to nearly 100 or so in the last years before 1492. The reason for the migration to the territories of the barons was that they had been judged on the whole to have been more favourable to their Jews than the rulers of the royal domain. This was viewed with disfavour by the Crown. At the same time, some Jews moved to the big towns, especially those which alternated as seats of central government, such as Palermo, Messina and Syracuse (“capital” of the queen’s demesne), which occasionally were thought to have been safer for Jews than the smaller towns and villages. In all probability, Jews were also affected by the general shift in population which took place in Sicily in the last two centuries of the Middle Ages. It has also been suggested that after the crisis in rural areas, following the Vespers and the ensuing armed conflicts, Frederick II (III), successfully initiated a return to the land and a consequent increase of the rural population and of agricultural production (chiefly grain). The list of growing rural settlements coincided with the establishment of Jewish communities, where none had been before, e.g. Racalmuto, Giuliana, Ciminna, Caltanissetta, Modica, S. Filippo d’Argirò, etc.2

2 Palermo, Settlement, p. 113. The literature on feudal Sicily is extensive. See Boscolo, Strutture sociali, pp. 181f.; Bresc, Monde Méditerranéen, passim, esp. pp. 668f.; Emanuele e Gaetani, Sicilia Nobile, passim; Epstein, op. cit., pp. 326f.; Italia, Sicilia feudale; Peri, Restaurazione e pacifico stato, pp. 123f.; San Martino de Spucches, La storia dei feudi, passim. See, for instance, Doc. 3940: Viceroy Durrea warns the Jews who had migrated from the royal domain to the baronial territories to return forthwith, on pain of capital punishment and confiscation of property. See also Docs. 2393 (Sciacca), 3343 (Catania). For Frederick’s initiative (the Volentes law), see Backman, Decline and Fall, pp. 166f.