The first indication of the presence of a significant number of Conversos, or neofiti in Sicily comes from a letter that Pope Sixtus IV wrote in 1483 to Queen Isabella, who on her marriage to Ferdinand received the large fief of Syracuse and its environment as a marriage gift. The letter mentioned the growth of false conversions that “had spread like a plague in Sicily.” Conversions in that period may have been the result of intensive preaching by mendicant friars (such as the Dominican Giovanni da Pistoia, who was active between 1463–1467), or perhaps a result of the riots of the summer of 1474 that spread throughout the island and hit the Jewries of southern Sicily, in the counties of Modica and Noto, particularly hard. As yet, however, there is not enough
documentation to determine the extent of conversions that occurred before the 1492 expulsion.

A large number of conversions occurred during the period of the expulsion, in part as a result of the persuasive tactics of the Sicilian authorities. On the 6th of July 1492, less than a month after the publication of the edict of expulsion, the Viceroy of Sicily, Don Ferrando de Acuña, published a letter promising the Jews who wished to convert that they would not be harmed and that they would be treated in the same way as Christians, and he had the letter read in the synagogues. The letters from the Portuguese Jew, Abraham Hayyim, who witnessed the expulsion, confirm this. In certain cases, Jews who had already sold their property in order to depart changed their minds and converted.

Another wave of conversions occurred after 1494, this time among the Sicilian Jews who had migrated to the kingdom of Naples. The death of King Ferrante I in January 1494 and the invasion of the French army, headed by Charles VIII, destabilized the country and riots broke out against the Jews, resulting in mass conversions. The presence of large numbers of converts in the Kingdom of Naples is attested to by a variety of sources, among them contemporary Jewish chronicles and the Capitoli (pleas) presented to King Federico d’Aragona, king of Naples in 1498. The latter mention “the New Christians who converted since the coming of the French to this place [i.e. the kingdom of Naples].” Of the conversion of the Sicilian Jews in the Kingdom of Naples we have only indirect evidence. An agreement between King Ferdinand the Catholic and a converted Sicilian Jew, the physician Fernando de Aragona, promised the converted exiles that they would be allowed to recover the property they had left in Sicily, deducting 40% of its value in favor of the king’s treasury. In another agreement concluded in 1497, the percentage was increased to 45%. The treasury expected to collect 65,000 Sicilian florins from this transaction and the fact that this sum

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