James W. Nelson Novoa

*Being the Nação in the Eternal City: New Christian Lives in Sixteenth-Century Rome*  

In *Being the Nação in the Eternal City*, Novoa attempts to reconstruct the lives of Portuguese New Christians and their community in Rome between the pontificates of Clement VII (r. 1523-34) and Sixtus V (r. 1585-90). Specifically, he writes biographies of seven Portuguese New Christians who acted as representatives, both official and unofficial, for the community in Rome and for their friends and relatives back in Portugal. He reconstructs their social life, economic activity, and, above all, their lobbying on behalf of the community before papal officials to mitigate the Portuguese crown’s policies towards New Christians at home and abroad. These agents sought to hinder the activities of the Portuguese inquisition and defended New Christians caught in its snares. In opposing the Portuguese crown, Novoa argues, these New Christians developed a sense of themselves as a separate “nation,” one that was connected to the larger Portuguese nation in Rome but different due to the Jewish ancestry of its members.

In the first three chapters, Novoa charts familiar territory for most scholars by providing essential background information on the Portuguese monarchy and its inquisition, the expulsion of the Portuguese Jews and the forced conversions of 1497, and the political and social milieu of papal Rome in the Renaissance. The strength of Novoa’s book lies in chapters four through nine where he explores the lives of the seven representatives of the Portuguese New Christians from the 1530s to the 1580s. These were Duarte de Paz, Diogo António, Diogo Fernandes Neto, Pedro Furtado, Jacome de Fonseca, António de Fonseca, and António Pinto. Using letters, dispatches, and notarial documents from the Vatican Secret Archives, Archivio di Stato di Roma, and the Arquivos Nacionais Torre do Tombo, Novoa reconstructs the presence of these New Christians from Portugal in Rome—their lives at the papal court, their efforts to lobby against the Portuguese monarchy’s policy against *conversos*, and their economic activity (since all of them combined diplomatic work with their economic interests, even when a few of them were also members of the clergy). As a whole, he is quite successful in reconstructing—using what little evidence he has—the lives of these marginal men who asserted themselves in the papal court and Roman scene. He convincingly demonstrates the influence these agents had on papal policy towards the New Christians and, in many cases, the ire they earned from Portuguese ambassadors and officials.
Two chapters stand out and are worthy of high praise. Chapter six details the trial of the merchant and self-proclaimed agent of the Portuguese New Christians in Rome, Diogo Fernandes Neto, who was arrested by papal authorities in 1542 on charges of embezzlement. Novoa analyzes the trial that took place in Castel Sant’Angelo more than a year later in 1543. This allows him to look into the world of the Portuguese New Christian community at the time. Reading the trial statements of witnesses—New Christian lawyers, clergyman, and merchants—who accused Neto of embezzling money from the community, Novoa finds a world full of rivalry, double-crossing, and bickering. Despite these tensions, he claims they recognized themselves as a separate community that shared the same struggle against the Portuguese monarchy. This is a compelling argument, although I wish Novoa would have analyzed these statements more deeply and cited specific words from the mouths of the witnesses to support this argument.

Chapter Eight provides another side of the story. Like Neto, many of the earlier representatives of the New Christian in Rome were tricksters and rogues, who looked out for their own interests as much as they did the community’s. A few of these representatives (Duarte de Paz and Jacome de Fonseca) were eventually forced out of Rome and finished their lives as Jews in the Ottoman Empire (or in de Paz’s case first as a Jew, then as a Muslim). In contrast to these earlier examples, António de Fonseca, the brother of the disgraced Jacome, established himself as a paragon of Christian piety in Rome. Novoa examines his life in Rome from his arrival in 1556 until his death in 1588. From letters, wills, and his family chapel in San Giacomo degli Spagnoli, Novoa presents a picture of a pious Christian, a Portuguese patriot, and a supporter of the Spanish crown after 1581. De Fonseca loaned money to the chronically indebted Portuguese ambassadors, served as a general in the hospice and church of San Antonio dei Portoghesi, and constructed a family chapel dedicated to the theme of the resurrection. In a particularly innovative section Novoa analyzes an inventory that was made of de Fonseca’s possessions as he neared death in 1588. In his house were portraits of popes and Portuguese kings, a number of religious books, and several paintings on Christian themes. One may ask if he went out of his way to appear overly pious and patriotic, especially given his brother’s conversion to Judaism in the Ottoman Empire. Novoa never asks the question, although he seems to anticipate it with his analysis of de Fonseca’s religious life.

Novoa shows how each of these New Christian agents carved themselves a place in Roman society and played a role in helping out fellow conversos in Portugal and abroad. In finding their way in diplomatic and economic circles of Rome, Novoa argues they helped forge a Portuguese New Christian community in the Eternal City. But this is one area where I wished he had