

2013

Review of François Soyer, *The Persecution of the Jews and Muslims of Portugal: King Manuel I and the End of Religious Tolerance (1496-7)*

Bryan Givens

Pepperdine University, givens@fake.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.asphs.net/bsphs>

Recommended Citation

Givens, Bryan (2013) "Review of François Soyer, *The Persecution of the Jews and Muslims of Portugal: King Manuel I and the End of Religious Tolerance (1496-7)*," *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies*: Vol. 38 : Iss. 1 , Article 13.

<https://doi.org/10.26431/0739-182X.1152>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.asphs.net/bsphs/vol38/iss1/13>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Association for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies* by an authorized editor of Association for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies. For more information, please contact jesus@udel.edu.

François Soyer, *The Persecution of the Jews and Muslims of Portugal: King Manuel I and the End of Religious Tolerance (1496-7)*. Leiden: Brill, 2011. 325 pp.

In *The Persecution of the Jews and Muslims of Portugal*, François Soyer has produced a well-organized and compelling revisionist argument to the traditional view of King Manuel I's policy of forced conversion for Jews and expulsion for Muslims in Portugal in 1496-7. The introductory chapter lays out the traditional (since Alexandre Herculano) explanation of Manuel's motives, namely, dynastic ambition to rule the Iberian Peninsula via his marriage to Princess Isabella of Castile, with the expulsion of the Jews the price he had to pay to seal the marriage treaty. With equal clarity, Soyer lays out his revisionist position in the form of three, inter-related theses: 1) the arrival of Castilian Jews in 1492 did not destabilize Portugal; 2) Manuel sought peace with Castile in the marriage negotiations rather than an opportunity for peninsular hegemony; and 3) the expulsion of the Portuguese Muslims sprang from very different motivations than the forced conversion of the Portuguese Jews, though they occurred simultaneously. This book succeeds in providing compelling evidence for all three conclusions.

Chapter 1 provides a comprehensive overview of the economic and social contexts of the Jewish and Muslim minorities in medieval Portugal. As in many other European kingdoms in the Middle Ages, these minorities were understood as "cameral" communities, i.e. the personal property of the monarch. And while both Jews and Muslims suffered discriminatory taxation and a variety of symbolic humiliations, Soyer convincingly demonstrates that they did enjoy considerable protections from the kings of medieval Portugal in comparison with other European states. Chapter 2 gives an overview of the arrival of Castilian Jews in Portugal, both before and in the immediate aftermath of the 1492 Edict of Expulsion. There is such wide variability in the numbers of Jews entering Portugal in the original sources that Soyer concludes a definitive number will probably never be reached (103). Nevertheless, he deploys an impressive array of evidence from chronicles and tax records to support his conclusion that the numbers have almost certainly been over-estimated, and notes that the Castilian Jews were not allowed by João II to stay in Portugal long enough to cause a major disruption there (136-8).

Chapter 3 gives a description of the accession of Manuel I to the throne after João II's death in 1495, and makes a convincing case that Manuel's goals were to calm the troubled domestic situation, to achieve a lasting peace with Castile, and to gather support for a crusade in Morocco. This sets the stage for

Chapter 4, in which Soyer examines Manuel's complex decisions in 1496-7. He acknowledges the pressure on Manuel due to the marriage negotiations with Princess Isabella of Castile, but points out that, in the end, only Castilian *conversos* were expelled; Manuel did not allow Portuguese Jews to leave and ultimately forced all of them to convert, a different dynamic than that of Castile five years earlier. Chapter 5 is the most ground-breaking because the situation of Portuguese Muslims has been studied in such a limited fashion heretofore. Here Soyer argues successfully that the Portuguese Muslims were expelled because Manuel wanted to prove his *bona fides* for a crusade in Morocco to the rest of Christendom, without provoking a backlash against Christians in Muslim lands that a policy of forced conversion might have engendered.

The book's greatest strength is Soyer's careful and nuanced use of a wide variety of sources in Portuguese, Spanish, and Hebrew. In the introduction, he helpfully includes an overview of the sources he uses in the body of the work. This is particularly important in this case because the vast majority of the royal registers from the years 1495 to 1498 are lost. Thus, Soyer had to use other sources such as chronicles, tax documents, inquisitorial trials, and even biblical commentaries creatively to tease out the relevant facts, which ironically enabled him to produce a more comprehensive and balanced analysis than had he merely consulted the registers alone. Though creative in his use of sources, he is also consistently cautious in his analysis and rarely makes claims that are not immediately evident from the texts he cites. His commitment not to argue beyond what the textual evidence will bear is the principal reason his theses are ultimately so persuasive.

The one substantive criticism I have stems from Soyer's statement on page 283 that "it would be wrong to consider... that the decision of Manuel to end religious tolerance in Portugal was partly motivated by any deliberately 'messianic' political ideology steeped in Christian millenarianism." He provides little to support such a broad claim, and his rejection of eschatological expectation as even partial motivation for Manuel's actions seems oddly dismissive from a scholar who consistently demonstrated such careful reading and nuanced analysis earlier in the book. As an investigator of the later tradition of Sebastianism, I hope Soyer will consider the Legend of Ourique, according to which Christ promised the first King of Portugal, Afonso Henriques, that he would lead a kingdom which would become a model of Christian practice and which would one day spread the gospel to all the earth. Surely, it is not coincidental that the legend reached its mature (and most extensive) form with the publication of Duarte Galvão's *Crónica de D. Afonso Henriques* in 1505, at precisely the same time Manuel was trying to extend Portuguese holdings in North Africa and in India, and only a few

years after his policies of conversion and expulsion. Ultimately, I believe a serious study of the possibility that Manuel was motivated, in part, by an eschatological *mentalité* would prove to be complementary to Soyer's excellent study of the political, religious, and dynastic goals that drove Manuel's desire to end religious toleration in Portugal in 1496-7.

Bryan Givens
Pepperdine University