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A Congregation of Hope: The Sephardic Jewish Diaspora in the Colonial Transatlantic

ABSTRACT: *This essay explores the Sephardic Jewish diaspora's involvement in early modern transatlantic trade networks and colonial territories. Through a combination of religious tolerance, mercantilism, and visions for a permanent community in a transnational and multilingual scenario, the Sephardic migration illuminates a wider and more nuanced dynamic of early modernity across the Iberian Peninsula, the Dutch Republic, Brazil, and Curaçao. By showcasing how the Sephardic diaspora benefited both economically and socially from this era of rapid globalization and increasing capitalism, the essay reveals the interconnected nature of colonial Latin America, early modern Europe, and the emergence of Jewish influence in the Atlantic world.*

KEYWORDS: *early modern history; colonialism; Atlantic world; Dutch Republic; Curaçao; Sephardic Judaism; Jewish diaspora; Eliau Namias de Crasto; Dutch West India Company; trade*

Introduction

In 1692, a Sephardic Jewish man called Eliau Nahamias de Crasto in death, Elias de Crasto in business matters, and Eliau Namias in the synagogue passed away.¹ An important figure in his faith community on the Caribbean island of Curaçao, Eliau's ornate tombstone in the local Jewish cemetery features a depiction of Elijah—the deceased's famous namesake among the prophets of ancient Israel—as he is being taken up into heaven in a whirlwind, accompanied by the corresponding quote from 2 Kings 2:11.² During the early modern period, a small but significant community of Jews was residing in Curaçao. While the respective birth and burial records are incomplete, their number is estimated at around 1,400.³ Sephardic Jews were closely tied to the island's economic and social systems, often connecting the Americas to Europe. Despite many difficulties, Sephardic Jews in Curaçao were able to establish a strong cultural and religious community in the Americas and managed to take advantage of the emerging transnational trade in the Caribbean, thus helping to transition the Atlantic world into modernity.

1. Cultural and Religious Rebuilding

While members of the Sephardic Jewish diaspora arrived on the shores of Curaçao as early as 1651, their broader story begins in the Iberian Peninsula, called "Sepharad" in the traditional Ladino vernacular. Sephardic communities were deeply connected to Iberian culture and language, first under the Visigoths as early as the fourth century and later alongside the Moors in Al-Andalus. Over the span of nearly a thousand years, Sephardic Jews experienced considerable prosperity and cultural integration in this religiously diverse area, which is particularly evident in Mudejar architectural syncretism and the multilingualism of

¹ Isaac Samuel Emmanuel, *Precious Stones of the Jews of Curacao: Curacao Jewry, 1656–1957* (Bloch Pub. Co., 1957), 172. According to Emmanuel, *Precious Stones*, 172, Eliau was "seventy-six years old on his death," suggesting that he must have been born c. 1616.

² Emmanuel, *Precious Stones*, 169 and image 23 (facing page 169).

³ Josette C. Goldish, *Once Jews: Stories of Caribbean Sephardim* (Markus Wiener Publishers, 2009), 2.

Ladino, Hebrew, Spanish, Portuguese, and Arabic.⁴ However, a late medieval shift in power eventually threatened the fabric of Moorish and Sephardic society, as well as its interwoven principles of tolerance and pluralism. For Sephardic Jews, the consolidation of the northern kingdoms under Queen Isabella I of Castile and King Ferdinand II of Aragon brought a new period of expulsion, fear, and uncertainty, reminiscent of their ancestors' biblical exiles in Egypt and Babylon. Following the Spanish conquest of Granada in 1492 and under the guise of fervent Catholicism, Isabella and Ferdinand issued the so-called "Alhambra Decree," which exiled Jews from all Spanish "kingdoms to depart and never to return" or to face "penalty of death and the confiscation" of all possessions, thereby cementing anti-Jewish sentiment into both Iberian policies and culture.⁵

Most Sephardic families faced three choices: flee the country to avoid political violence; abandon Judaism altogether and convert to Catholicism to avoid the Inquisition; or assume the role of a "converso" (i.e., become a crypto-Jew). The latter usually involved changing one's name, submitting to a Christian baptism, and outwardly accepting Catholic rituals while simultaneously celebrating Jewish customs in private under the continual risk of violence or expulsion. Many Sephardic families fled west to Portugal, where they lived for nearly a century in relative peace as crypto-Jews. However, following the Portuguese succession crisis of 1578, King Philip II of Spain invaded the country and assumed the throne, thereby forcing most Jews to flee the Iberian Peninsula altogether.⁶ This launched the Sephardic migration across the Atlantic. Longing for a permanent settlement, many Sephardic families would initially flee north. The Netherlands, having declared their independence from Spain early during the Eighty Years' War (1568–1648), offered greater religious tolerance.⁷ Comprising twenty percent of the population in the Netherlands, the Dutch Reformed Church was tolerant toward other Protestant groups, such as the French Huguenots, and even toward Roman Catholics.⁸ Amsterdam proved to be particularly open toward Sephardic Jews, largely due to their wealth and ties to various colonial trade networks that they brought with them from Spain and Portugal. While not allowed to own property or pursue careers reserved for Protestants, Sephardic Jews were permitted to observe their own religious holidays and participate in international trade networks under private charters, such as the *West-Indische Compagnie* or Dutch West India Company. Thus, in the Netherlands, the Sephardic community was able to rebuild itself as a prosperous and unified Jewish congregation.

The story of Eliau Crasto reflects the increasing involvement of Amsterdam's Sephardic community in globalization and collaboration with colonial economic structures. His family, of Portuguese descent, had fled the Inquisition in favor of the Dutch Republic's broader

⁴ Jeffrey Gorsky, *Exiles in Sepharad: The Jewish Millennium in Spain* (University of Nebraska Press, 2015), chap. 2 ("The Visigoth Persecution of the Jews").

⁵ "The Alhambra Decree: Edict of the Expulsion of the Jews of Spain (1492)," Florida Atlantic University, [online](#).

⁶ Goldish, *Once Jews*, 4.

⁷ The Netherlands comprised various provinces with varying policies regarding religious tolerance and Judaism, with Holland and Zeeland reputed as being the most tolerant, likely due to their engagement in international trade.

⁸ Peter J. Rietbergen, *The New Illustrated History of Amsterdam* (Bekking & Blitz Uitgevers, 2021), 57.

economic and social opportunities for merchant Jews. In 1636, one Manuel Nehemias, a “Portuguese of the Jewish Nation” and most likely Eliau’s father, successfully asked the Dutch West India Company for permission to send a colony of approximately two hundred Jewish merchants and their families to Recife, Brazil.⁹ Thus, young Eliau became an original member of the first Jewish congregation—Kahal Zur Israel (“Rock of Israel”)—in the Americas.

Located in northeastern Brazil, Recife was a valuable location for emerging European colonial powers due to its suitable environment for the cultivation of sugar, tobacco, and brazilwood. Furthermore, its relative geographical proximity to both Europe and western Africa ensured that it would become a strategic hub in the transatlantic slave trade. During its early colonial period, Recife was occupied by the Portuguese. However, the Dutch captured the territory in 1630, which effectively transferred the operation of the local sugar mills and all economic policymaking to Dutch actors. Eliau spent his early adulthood in Dutch-occupied Recife, where he served his community in various capacities—including treasurer—until 1654.¹⁰ In that year, the Portuguese retook Recife, forcing Eliau, his family, and many members of the city’s Kahal Zur Israel congregation to leave the territory under a safe-passage agreement, albeit while suffering immense social and financial losses. After witnessing almost two decades of community and business-building in the Americas being wiped away overnight, the Crastos were determined to find a new home for themselves and their coreligionists. Following a brief sojourn in Amsterdam, Eliau arrived on Curaçao in 1659, accompanied by his wife Sara Brandon and their three-year-old son Manuel. Indeed, many of Recife’s Sephardic Jews moved north to Caribbean territories, including Guyana, Barbados, Jamaica, and Curaçao, that were—or would soon be—occupied by non-Spanish nations and practiced relative tolerance.¹¹

2. Economic Opportunities

The Sephardic congregation’s key method to rebuild itself as a Jewish center in the Caribbean was by establishing its financial security through transnational trade. After their departure from Brazil, the Jewish community formed the Beth Israel Portuguese “Esnoga” (i.e., “synagogue” in Ladino) in Amsterdam with capital acquired from Brazil’s sugarcane industry and, consequently, from the transatlantic slave trade which provided unfree labor in these sugar mills. The Portuguese synagogue displayed a strong cultural syncretism of Dutch architecture and Jewish faith, offering Sephardic Jews greater safety and deeper cultural integration within the community. A marvel of engineering and city planning, the Esnoga inspired the Sephardic community in the Dutch colonies to establish a unified congregation that was centered on Amsterdam and the economic opportunities provided through

⁹ Emmanuel, *Precious Stones*, 171; “Genealogical History of the Aboab Family by Isaac de Matatiah Aboab,” copied by his son Matatiah de Isaac Aboab, Amsterdam, 1676–1719, Ets Haim Bibliotheek, Livraria Montezinos, EH 48 E 27, [online](#).

¹⁰ Emmanuel, *Precious Stones*, 171.

¹¹ Goldish, *Once Jews*, 5.

negotiations with the Dutch West India Company.¹² Alan P. Marcus, a scholar of geography and urban planning, has characterized this phenomenon as a “new experiment of religious tolerance and economic inclusion in the Atlantic world,”¹³ which offered Jews an opportunity to recreate economic growth in Dutch colonies like Curaçao.

Before the Dutch West India Company seized the island in 1634, Curaçao had been a Spanish colony in the Caribbean just north of Venezuela. Unlike Recife, Curaçao was not considered highly valuable and therefore labeled “isla inutil” (i.e., “useless island”). It had primarily been utilized for cattle and sheep herding, so the Dutch were said to have “encountered little resistance” when they captured the island.¹⁴ After its takeover, the Dutch West India Company offered plots of land to entice European settlement and encourage trade. Communities were conditionally permitted to rent land “for 50 persons, 2 miles along the coast, for 100 persons, 4 miles” in increments of four years, contingent upon their “cultivation and improvement” of the Dutch economy.¹⁵ Dutch Curaçao was initially envisioned to be utilized for the cultivation of sugar cane; however, its inadequate terrain and unfavorable weather conditions rendered this both unrealistic and unprofitable. As a result, Curaçao’s residents looked elsewhere for income. In 1651, the Sephardic Jews’ newly established Mikvé Israel-Emanuel (i.e., “Hope of Israel-Emanuel”) synagogue was granted two miles of coastline in Willemstad to establish a fruitful community.

Curaçao offered Sephardic Jews a new opportunity for prosperity. By the end of the early modern period, their Curaçaoan congregation’s approximately 1,500 recorded members constituted one of the largest synagogues in the Caribbean. In fact, about thirty-eight percent of the island’s total European population were Jewish, making them an important minority.¹⁶ Meanwhile, significant regions of the Caribbean, including Cuba, Santo Domingo, and Puerto Rico, remained Spanish colonies and were therefore subject to the Inquisition’s policies of antisemitism. While this complicated the Jewish Curaçaoans’ trade with larger islands in the Caribbean, it solidified their community internally, with most of its men active as “merchants, insurance agents, shipowners, ship captains, and plantation owners.”¹⁷

Early modern colonial projects across the globe, particularly in the Caribbean, reflected the mercantilist economic system. Originating in the sixteenth century, this system propagated a European nation’s exporting of colonial goods while minimizing the same nation’s importing

¹² See Stanley Mirvis, *The Jews of Eighteenth-Century Jamaica: A Testamentary History of a Diaspora in Transition* (Yale University Press, 2020); Stuart B. Schwartz, ed., *Tropical Babylons: Sugar and the Making of the Atlantic World, 1450–1680* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

¹³ Alan P. Marcus, *Portuguese Jews and New Christians in Colonial Brazil, 1500–1822: A New Geography of the Atlantic World* (University of New Mexico Press, 2024), 123.

¹⁴ Goldish, *Once Jews*, 5.

¹⁵ “Grant of Land on Curaçao to Joseph Nunes de Fonseca,” February 22, 1652, in *New Netherland Documents*, Volume XVII: *Curaçao Papers, 1640–1665*, trans. and ed. Charles T. Gehring and Jacob A. Schiltkamp (Heart of the Lakes Publishing, 1987), 50.

¹⁶ Goldish, *Once Jews*, 12.

¹⁷ Mirvis, *Jews of Eighteenth-Century Jamaica*, 246, argues that, while the depiction of Sephardic Jews in Latin America and the Caribbean as merchants or slave owners is not inaccurate, one must note that there were “Jewish planters ... poor *despachados*, physicians, metal workers, entertainers, and fishermen” in the Caribbean as well.

of any goods from other European nations. It also viewed the “global supply of wealth,” as measured in gold, silver, and other precious materials, as “finite” and therefore considered the maximum acquisition of these resources a primary interest of the state.¹⁸ The mercantilist economic system propelled emerging nation states into a direct competition for global dominance, both in Europe itself and throughout the colonies overseas. While Sephardic Jews did not invent this system, they benefited from it by collaborating with the Dutch in their effort to control the colonial marketplace. From their favorable geopolitical vantage point, Curaçaoan Jews were “eagerly anticipating” new access to untapped markets.¹⁹

The economic strength of Curaçao’s Mikvé Israel-Emanuel congregation became evident during Eliau Crasto’s final years. Between 1675 and 1686, he served four terms as its president.²⁰ After Eliau’s death in 1692, his wife Sara came into a considerable inheritance. However, according to a private letter between her brother-in-law David Levy Dovale and his son (Sara’s nephew) Manuel Levy, written in 1694, Sara did not manage these funds to the satisfaction of her extended family or the wider Curaçaoan Jewish community.²¹ In time, however, Sara’s and Eliau’s son Mordechay (d. May 5, 1716) emerged as a prominent member of Curaçao’s Mikvé Israel-Emanuel synagogue.²²

Conclusion

While most Sephardic Jewish families were not as wealthy or politically influential as the Crastos, all undertook long and arduous journeys in search of a safer, more prosperous life for themselves and other members of their faith community. Sharing a history marked by displacement and forced migration, the Sephardic diaspora continually demonstrated a sustained hope that the emerging Atlantic world, including the colonies of the tolerant Dutch Republic and the materially rich Americas, could offer them a refuge, thereby echoing the Israelites’ journey from bondage in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. The Sephardic experience in the Americas is often not represented in the wider Jewish story or arbitrarily separated by modern geographical or cultural divides. Yet their journey, like that of many other diasporic people, offers crucial insights into the early modern Atlantic world—and this early modern Atlantic world is best understood by appreciating all its interconnected features, including its economic systems, its religious diversity, and its ideas of community.

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¹⁸ Corporate Finance Institute, “Mercantilism,” [online](#).

¹⁹ Goldish, *Once Jews*, 13.

²⁰ Emmanuel, *Precious Stones*, 172.

²¹ Emmanuel, *Precious Stones*, 173.

²² Emmanuel, *Precious Stones*, 229–230.