

FROM THE JEWS TO THE “XUETES” OF MALLORCA

AFTER THE CATALAN CONQUEST OF 1229, THE ISLAND'S JEWS ATTAINED A SOLID POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL STATUS. IN THE CITY OF MALLORCA THEY HAD THEIR OWN QUARTER, CALLED THE “CALL”, WHICH FORMED A SORT OF SMALL CITY WITHIN THE CITY. IT WAS ISOLATED FROM THE REST AND AT NIGHT THE GATES WERE CLOSED TO PREVENT ANYONE FROM ENTERING OR LEAVING.

GABRIEL ENSENYAT | PUJOL UNIVERSITY OF THE BALEARIC ISLES

Accounts of the presence of Jewish communities in the Balearic Islands go back a long way. In the year 418 Bishop Sever of Menorca issued an encyclical informing of the to him miraculous event of the mass conversion to Christianity of the whole of Menorca's Hebraic community. The fact is, however, that there was nothing in the least miraculous about this conversion: it was the result of the Menorcan Christians' aggressive attitude to the Jews, who opted for a change of faith so as to avoid potentially even worse consequences. This fact (which, moreover, is the first known example of anti-Semitism in Europe) was in some ways a premonition of what was to be the destiny of the island's Jews.

After the fifth century we have no further news of the existence of Semitic groups in the archipelago, though this does not mean that they had disappeared. This gap in our knowledge continues throughout the Muslim period, with the sole exception of a small eleventh century site, known as the Arab baths but in fact Jewish. Not until the Catalan conquest of 1229 do we once

again take up the thread of the history of the island's Semites. The promptness with which they reappear in the records is an indication of their presence, at least in Mallorca, during the previous centuries. From this moment on they enjoyed a solid political, economic and social status. In the city of Mallorca they had their own quarter, called the *Call*, and their own “municipal” organisation, with internal authorities. Needless to say, the *Call* was like a kind of small city within the city; it was isolated from the rest and at night the gates were closed to prevent anyone from entering or leaving. Inside, the daily life of the Jews was governed by Mosaic law, with its characteristic customs and habits. They even used Hebrew to draw up documents, though we do not know to what extent they spoke it. In addition, they were also segregated when it came to paying taxes, since they were assigned a fixed amount which, with a certain criterion of proportionality, they had to raise between them.

Even so, the two communities –the Jewish and the Christian– were not oblivious to each other and could hardly ignore each other. It is well

known that the Jews played an important part as moneylenders during the Middle Ages, taking advantage of Christianity's prohibition of usury. However, this was not their only occupation in Mallorca, or indeed anywhere else (not all Jews were rich, and the majority made a living from manual work or off the land); it was complemented by a considerable trading activity, since after the conquest the Islands became fully integrated in the commercial circuits of the Mediterranean and came to play a leading role in them.

However, the Jews' mercantile activities were directed primarily at internal trade, with a special influence in rural areas, providing the peasants with animals, corn and cloth. They also made an important contribution to scientific activity. Jewish medicine in the Islands enjoyed a position of privilege similar to that reached in other areas, with famous doctors like Judà Mosconi. Cartography, especially, brought them extraordinary, almost enigmatic fame, since from their dark workshops coasts and maritime routes came plotted with great precision and beauty. The



JEWELLER'S SHOP IN THE SILVERMITHS STREET IN PALMA

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Cresques family is the most representative.

But all this came to an end in 1391. The pogroms which had started on the mainland spread to Mallorca and led to the sack of the *Call*. Hundreds of Jews were murdered by an angry mob who blamed them for all the island's ills. It was the beginning of the end for the community, since the majority of the survivors either converted to Christianity or fled. Nevertheless, the Jewish quarter refused to disappear and during subsequent decades was repopulated by Jews from other places. But violence broke out again in 1435, causing a second, definitive conversion. Once again their collective history faced them with the dilemma of renouncing their faith or dying. There was only one answer, and the Jews were baptized *en masse*.

And so the Jewish "problem" was resolved in Mallorca –only apparently, as we shall see– long before the Catholic Monarchs' final solution. The expulsion of 1492 had no effect on the island. No-one was inconvenienced or forced to flee: officially, at least, there were no Jews there. The calm was not to last

long. The arrival of the Inquisition in 1478 set a new –and bloody– trap: that of the converted Jews, or *xuetes*. Because the conversion had been forced, there was always the suspicion that, inwardly, the new Christians continued faithful to Judaism. The result was that during the Counter-Reformation, in the seventeenth century, the *autos-da-fé* against the converts provided a lavish and all-too-frequent spectacle. The consequences were the burning alive of various suspects, as well as lesser punishments –imprisonment and whipping– and the confiscation of properties.

All of this contributed to the creation of a ghetto. Judaic practices were attributed to several families –fifteen, in all–, who became the object of popular derision. Segregation –on an external level– and endogamy –internally– have marked the development of this group down to this day. Enclosed in the old *Call menor*, they developed a jewellery industry which was and still is the occupation most characteristic of the converts' descendants: the Carrer de la Argenteria (Silvermiths Street) in Palma is an illustration of this. In fact, for

many years, the "Pure Blood Statutes" made the guilds inaccessible to the *xuetes*, who were therefore excluded from a number of trades. Following the abolition of the Statutes by Charles III in 1778, it was the discriminating attitude of the rest of the Majorcans that maintained the segregation. As a result of this their expertise in silver and gold reached new heights. Almost paradoxically, the best examples of their art are to be found in religious silver- and goldware, and especially in the monstrances. This silverware, in its lesser manifestations, also reached the towns and villages which the *marxandos*, or Jewish merchants, visited on Sundays, holidays and market days to sell the objects they manufactured, amongst which were the sets of buttons and laces for the country women. All this is changing now: the jewellers no longer visit the towns in the country and there are many people in Palma who have opened jeweller's shops and are not *xuetes*. Here we see reflected a tradition that has started to disappear, though in this case it is also the result of an unjust, odious discrimination which, luckily, with the younger generations, is coming to an end. ■