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EM Networks of Common Interests

Book review: Benedetto Ligorio, *L'interesse comune nel Rinascimento: I network dei sefarditi della Repubblica di Ragusa tra Italia e Balcani.* Editori Riuniti Univ. Press, 15 November 2024, pp. 218. ISBN-10: 8835982294; ISBN-13: 9788835982296 (Paperback)

Abstract

Benedetto Ligorio's book delves into the role of Sephardic Jews in the Republic of Ragusa during the 16th century as key players in international trade. Drawing on social network analysis and quantitative archival data, Ligorio examines the Jews' commercial activities and demonstrates they were integral to Ragusa's thriving economy, connecting Venice, Ancona, and Ottoman-controlled regions. He compares the establishment of the ghetto in Ragusa in 1546 with those in Venice and Rome, and highlights the pragmatism of Ragusa's government in allowing its Jewish merchants to continue their commercial activities despite imposed restrictions. Ligorio sheds light on the fluctuating size of the Jewish community, and the eventual concentration of their economic activities in merchant roles after the 1571 decree. Ligorio's work contributes significantly to the understanding of the Jewish diaspora in the Early Modern

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Mediterranean, opening avenues for further research into the socioeconomic dynamics of the vibrant Ragusan community and beyond.

Keywords: Sephardic Jews, Ragusan economy, Early Modern Period, international trade, commercial networks, social network analysis.

Benedetto Ligorio's focus in his new book is on the economic aspects of the Jewish Sephardi presence in the Republic of Ragusa in the Early Modern Period. The first Jews who settled there in the 14th century, mainly doctors and merchants, were joined by conversos escaping the Spanish and Portuguese expulsions and forced conversions, and while some remained for various periods of time, others continued their way to Constantinople, Salonica or other destinations around the Adriatic and in the Balkans. Able and experienced merchants, the Sephardic Jews who stayed in Ragusa established successful commercial networks thanks to its strategic location as well as its neutrality, and became key players in international trade, relying on relatives and connections in Belgrade, Sarajevo, Sofia, Buda, and the Ottoman Empire. Their role as mediators was particularly important for the traffic of merchandise to and from other port cities, predominantly Ancona and Venice. Ligorio's main methodology relies on a social network analysis, combined with the quantitative analysis of data culled from archival documents, such as notaries' books as well as marriage contracts and wills.

Ligorio elucidates that the part Jewish women played in commercial transactions was far from negligible, although the amounts of money they handled were often not as high as those handled by Jewish men. Ligorio concludes as much based on insurance policies issued to women for their exports towards Ancona (Ligorio, 2024, p. 105) as well as Venice (p. 116), compared with those issued to men. Although the memoirs of a Sephardic counterpart to Glikl of Hamelin (or Glückel of Hameln, 1646–1724) have not yet been found, it seems that these women had more agency than could be attributed to them based on the restraints typical of the time as well as those imposed on them by their families and communal background. Ligorio publishes a document attesting to the extensive economic operation of a more privileged woman, the famous Gracia Mendes (alias Beatrice de Luna Miques) in Ragusa, adding his own contribution to current research (Ligorio, 2024, pp. 34–35).

The establishment of the ghetto in Venice in 1516 led to analogous decrees in other parts of the Italian Peninsula and Europe. Ragusa followed suit and announced the erection of a ghetto in the city in 1546, though initially it only comprised four units of lodgings. Ligorio provides a comparison between the documents instituting the ghettos of Venice, of Ragusa and of

Rome (Ligorio, 2024, pp. 46–47). Similarly to the ghetto of Venice, the doors of the ghetto in Ragusa were locked between sundown and sunset, under the supervision of a guard who kept the key to the gate. The Ragusan Jews were further constrained to pay a tax of half a ducat per inhabitant per month, and the merchandise introduced into the ghetto was also taxed. Yet, as opposed to the Jews in the ghetto of Rome, in Ragusa Jews were not restricted in their commercial practices, which were quite varied, nor in their professions, and despite clerical pressure Jewish doctors did treat Christian patients.

The increasing economic marginalization of Jews in the Papal States as well as the difficulties experienced along the Adriatic coast following the war with Cyprus (which spared the Ragusan state thanks to its continued neutrality), created a favorable incentive for Jews wishing to immigrate there, and their numbers rose notably in the years 1550–1570. A new decree issued in 1571 renewed the order to live within the ghetto, which was enlarged for this purpose. The ghetto was enlarged again in 1589. Ligorio notes that Jews often lived outside the ghetto, particularly rich Jews, despite the formal decrees. The Ragusan government clearly operated pragmatically, preferring to safeguard its economic interests rather than those of the Church. The number of Jews fluctuated in reaction to various vicissitudes and government decisions, and reached its peak close to the time of the 1667 earthquake that caused the death of 39 members of the Jewish community.

Ligorio lists the languages the Jews of Ragusa used: Italian, which he distinguishes as the lingua franca of commerce in the Mediterranean, Ladino, Latin and Hebrew, at least well enough to read liturgical texts and also used for literary expression (Ligorio, 2024, pp. 76–77). It is important to stress that Hebrew, far from becoming a dead language like some other liturgical languages such as Coptic, had remained very much alive over the centuries since Jews had been forced to abandon their territory, and despite the Spanish and Portuguese expulsions hundreds of years later. Not only did Jews write poetry and literary works in Hebrew, but Hebrew remained a language that could be understood even in times when its use in daily life was minimal. As Ligorio notes, Jews also used Hebrew letters when writing in local Jewish languages, and, importantly, most Jews were literate. It seems to me that this is a particularly pertinent aspect of the Jewish diaspora. Jewish families and the continuity of communities can be understood more easily in this light, since Hebrew not only upheld family and communal relationships but also the functioning of Jewish networks. Hebrew was an advantageous language for commercial relations, safeguarding information from falling into the wrong hands. It was also a language Jews could use to communicate delicate information regard-

ing people one community favored or disfavored to another community, such as data about a potential bridegroom or a person who had behaved unethically in one place and its community warned other communities of his deeds. In addition, information that Jews wished to keep from reaching the local authorities was safer when transferred in Hebrew. In fact, the local political authorities as well as Church officials were very much aware of the possibilities Hebrew afforded and did their best to counter this by using those among their own personnel who knew Hebrew, and would similarly consult with Christian scholars who had mastered the language.

What is clarified in Ligorio's study is that where Jews were allowed to thrive, they collaborated with the local population as well as with the elites and local authorities, and helped build a strong economy that was advantageous to all. The case of Livorno exemplifies this most clearly, since its Jewish community was created and grew alongside the establishment of the town itself, which enjoyed the fruits of its active Sephardic merchants. In Ragusa, Ligorio points out that the Jewish minority was included in the local economic system based on its commercial potential and its wide network that enhanced the advantages and possible reciprocity between Jews and Christians in their transactions (Ligorio, 2024, p. 79).

Ligorio provides many examples of joint commercial endeavors between Ragusa's Jews and Christian merchants, which created mutual fidelity and dependency between merchants of the two faiths. Ligorio also mentions Jorio Tadić, the first Yugoslav historian who evaluated the Ragusan Jews' contribution to the local economy. He noted that the Ragusan Jews' role as mediators between the Sublime Porte and the West was of particular importance to a city that did its utmost to adhere to its neutrality, to its great benefit, amid continuous conflicts between Venice and the Ottoman Empire. The decisions and counter-decisions reached by the Senate of the Ragusan Republic regarding the Jews underline the Jews' importance to the local economy. The Senate issued a decree of expulsion of Jews and conversos between 1514 and 1515, although they were still allowed to reside in the city as long as necessary for their affairs. As Ligorio points out, this decree was probably not rigidly enforced due to the role the Jews played in the commercial traffic throughout the Balkans, which led the Senate to retrace its steps and allow them to reside in the city again as of 1538. In 1571, alongside the renewed order for Jews to live in the ghetto, the decree stated that all Jews who were not merchants or in possession of merchandise would have to leave the town within eight days, thereby only allowing Jewish merchants to reside there, in effect turning the Jewish Ragusan community into a community solely of merchants. The Ragusan state thus

found a way to have the cake and eat it too, as it were, and continued to enjoy the services of its able Jewish merchants that mediated in commercial deals not only with Ancona and Venice but also with Valona, as the documents attesting to the insurance of ships and goods amply demonstrate. At the beginning of the 17th century, the Jews of Ragusa oversaw at least a third of the exports, and their role became increasingly relevant on the Balkan marketplaces.

On a personal note, I found it easier to grasp the excellent charts and tables Ligorio provides than the somewhat tedious verbal descriptions, but this may be my own preference. It would have been illuminating to find a brief discussion of the findings presented in each table directly underneath it, for example. It would also have been helpful if the texts quoted in the original Latin had been provided with a translation into Italian. That said, the amplitude of the research and of newly published archival materials brought here is impressive, and this book represents an important addition to the study of the conditions and activities of the Jews of Ragusa in the Early Modern Period. Moreover, it is Ligorio's praiseworthy achievement that he undoubtedly puts Ragusa in focus, and gives many good reasons to follow the numerous threads of possible further research that will hopefully be taken up and continued, not least by Ligorio himself.

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תקציר

רשתות של אינטרסים משותפים בעת המוקדמת החדשה

ספרו של בנדטו ליגוריו עוסק בתפקידם של היהודים הספרדים ברפובליקה של רגוזה במהלך המאה ה-16 ומתאר את תפקידם כשחקני מפתח בסחר הבינלאומי. תוך התבססות על ניתוח כמותי של חומרי ארכיון, ליגוריו בוחן את הפעילות המסחרית של היהודים ומראה שהם היו חלק בלתי נפרד מן הכלכלה המשגשגת של רגוזה. הם סייעו לקשר בין רגוזה לונציה, אנקונה והאזורים שהיו אז בשליטה עות'מאנית. הוא משווה את הקמת הגטו ברגוזה בשנת 1546 להקמת הגטאות בוונציה וברומא, ומדגיש את הגישה הפרגמטית של השלטון ברגוזה שהתיר לנתיניו היהודים להמשיך בפעילות המסחר שלהם למרות ההגבלות שהוטלו עליהם. ליגוריו שופך אור על השינויים הדמוגרפיים בקהילה היהודית, ועל כך שבסופו של דבר, בעקבות הצו של שנת 1571, פעילותם הכלכלית צומצמה לתחום הסחר. מחקרו של ליגורו תורם

תרומה משמעותית להבנת התפוצה היהודית בעת החדשה המוקדמת, ופותח נתיבים למחקרי המשך על הדינמיקה החברתית-כלכלית בקהילת רגוזה התוססת ומעבר לה.

מילות מפתח: יהודים ספרדים; כלכלת רגוזה; העת המוקדמת החדשה; סחר בינלאומי; רשתות מסחר; ניתוח רשתות חברתיות.

Sieci wspólnych interesów we wczesnej nowożytności

Tematem książki Benedetto Ligorio są Żydzi sefardyjscy w Republice Raguzy w XVI w. oraz ich rola jako kluczowych graczy w handlu międzynarodowym. W oparciu o analizę ilościową materiałów archiwalnych Ligorio bada działalność handlową Żydów i pokazuje, że stanowili oni nierozerwalną część kwitnącej gospodarki Republiki Raguzy, łącząc ją z Wenecją, Ankoną oraz terenami pod panowaniem osmańskim. Ligorio porównuje utworzenie getta w Raguzie w 1546 r. z powstaniem gett w Wenecji i Rzymie, kładąc nacisk na pragmatyczne podejście władz Raguzy, które pozwoliły swoim żydowskim poddanym na dalszy udział w handlu pomimo narzuconych na nich ograniczeń. Ligorio rzuca światło na zmiany demograficzne zachodzące w społeczności żydowskiej i na to, że ostatecznie w wyniku dekretu z 1571 r. działalność gospodarcza Żydów ograniczona została do handlu. Badania Ligorio wnoszą znaczący wkład w zrozumienie funkcjonowania żydowskiej diaspory epoki wczesnonowożytnej, otwierając jednocześnie nowe perspektywy dalszych badań nad dynamiką społeczno-gospodarczą Raguzy i nie tylko.

Słowa kluczowe: Żydzi sefardyjscy, gospodarka Raguzy, epoka wczesnonowożytna, handel międzynarodowy, sieci handlowe, analiza sieci społecznych.

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Note

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