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# ‘Secret Synagogues’: Fact and Fantasy from Portugal to Macau

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## **ABSTRACT**

Ideas and fantasies about Jews and Judaism have constituted an integral part of the cultural matrix through which Christians in the Western World have fashioned their understanding of the world. This article examines the claims made by the Jesuit Francisco de Meneses and inquisitor Rui Sodrinho de Mesquita concerning the existence of a large community of Judaizing *conversos* established in Macau and seeking to operate a secret synagogue. When analyzed against the well-established trend amongst early modern Spanish and Portuguese writers to vastly exaggerate the size of *converso* communities and the extent of judaizing, a necessary note of caution must arise in the way that such claims about Judaizing *conversos* are treated by historians.

**KEYWORDS:** Portugal, Macau, Synagogue, Judaism, *Conversos*

## **RESUMO**

Ideias e fantasias sobre os judeus e o Judaísmo têm constituído uma parte integral da matriz cultural através da qual, no mundo ocidental, os cristãos têm engendrado o seu entendimento do mundo. Este artigo examina as alegações feitas pelo jesuíta Francisco de Meneses e pelo inquisidor Rui Sodrinho de Mesquita relativas à existência de uma grande comunidade de conversos judaizantes em Macau que procuravam estabelecer uma sinagoga secreta. Quando analisada tendo em consideração a tendência corrente entre os autores espanhóis e portugueses modernos de exagerar vastamente o tamanho das comunidades conversas e a extensão dos comportamentos judaizantes, alguma cautela deve ser empregue na forma como tais alegações sobre conversos judaizantes têm sido interpretadas pela historiografia.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Portugal, Macau, Sinagoga, Judaísmo, *Conversos*

In his work *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition*, David Nirenberg has surveyed attitudes toward Jews and Judaism and convincingly argued that “ideas about Jews and Judaism” and “pathological fantasies of Judaism” have constituted an essential part of the way in which people in the Western World have “constructed the reality of their world”.<sup>1</sup> During a period that stretches from the early sixteenth century to the middle of the eighteenth century, some members of the church and laity in Portugal and its overseas territories propagated an alarming message about Jews in their sermons and polemical literature. It was alleged that the descendants of converted Jews, known alternatively as *conversos* or ‘New Christians’, were secretly worshipping in secret synagogues, clandestinely plotting to bring about the downfall of the Catholic Church and Portuguese monarchy by means of treason, murder and sabotage.<sup>2</sup>

This article offers a concise examination of how the image of the synagogue developed in the early modern Iberian World in general and Portugal and its overseas territories in particular. The synagogue evolved from its medieval representation as the personification of Judaism and Jews to become the basis of conspiracy theories accusing *conversos* of organising secret synagogues. It will be argued that the perception of these secret synagogues that developed over time in the minds of many ‘Old Christians’ (those Iberian Christians not descended from Jews) departed from fact and promoted fantasies about the supposed ‘Jewish peril’ menacing the monarchy and Church in the Iberian world. To support this argument, this article concludes by examining the situation in the one of the most geographically distant early modern Portuguese overseas territories: Macau in southern China. The example of Macau serves to demonstrate that the sixteenth-century or seventeenth-century claims of early modern churchmen about the existence of a large population of *conversos* seeking to establish secret synagogues need to be treated with a degree of caution (and even scepticism). The allegations made in Macau will also be compared and contrasted the wider context of similar claims made elsewhere in the Spanish and Portuguese empires.

<sup>1</sup> David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism. The Western Tradition*, New York, W. W. Norton, 2013, pp. 217-245.

<sup>2</sup> For a survey of this literature see Bruno Feitler, *The Imaginary Synagogue. Anti-Jewish Literature in the Portuguese Early Modern World (16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> Centuries)*, Leiden, Brill, 2015. For an analysis of the Antisemitic concept of a ‘Jewish Plot’ in the Iberian world see F. Soyer, *Antisemitic Conspiracy Theories in the Early Modern Iberian World: Narratives of Fear and Hatred*, Leiden, Brill, 2019 (forthcoming).

## The Synagogue as a Personification of Judaism in Christian Thought

The term 'synagogue' – a word that is Greek in origin (*συναγωγή*, or 'assembly', which is related to the original Hebrew *bet kenesset* or 'house of assembly') – refers to the consecrated space or building in which Jews assemble to worship God. Each synagogue contains a main hall with a raised platform or 'pulpit' (the *bimah*) upon which rabbis stand to read the sacred Torah scrolls, which are stored in a cabinet (or 'ark') positioned to ensure that the worshippers facing it are also facing in the direction of Jerusalem.

From a very early date, the synagogue came to represent much more than just a physical space to Christian polemicists. There are two references to the "Synagogue of Satan" in the Book of Revelation (2:9 and 3:9). Although the passages specifically refer to the Jewish communities in Smyrna and Philadelphia that persecuted the early Christian churches in those towns, they created a powerful trope. As a personified representation of both the Jewish faith and the Jewish population, the Synagogue (*Synagoga*) features prominently in Christian polemics, standing in opposition to the Christian community, itself personified in the Church (*Ecclesia*). In his attacks on Jews and Judaism, John Chrysostom (349-407), launched vituperative barbs at the Synagogue, underlining the immoral and demonic nature of Judaism ("the judaizing disease") and the Jews ("the Jews are demons") in his first *oration* against the Jews:

I said that the synagogue is no better than a theatre [...] But the synagogue is not only a brothel and a theatre; it also is a den of robbers and a lodging for wild beasts. [...] Indeed the synagogue is less deserving of honour than any inn. It is not merely a lodging place for robbers and cheats but also for demons. This is true not only of the synagogues but also of the souls of the Jews [...]. So the godlessness of the Jews and the pagans is on a par. But the Jews practice a deceit which is more dangerous. In their synagogue stands an invisible altar of deceit on which they sacrifice not sheep and calves but the souls of men.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Pauline Allen and Wendy Mayer, *John Chrysostom*, London, Routledge, 2000, pp. 153-161.

His contemporary, Bishop Ambrose of Milan (c. 340-397), likewise presented this utter opposition between Christians and Jews as one pitting the Church against the Synagogue, defending the destruction of a synagogue in Callinicum (Syria) as justified because it was “a home of unbelief, a house of impiety, a receptacle of folly, which God Himself has condemned”.<sup>4</sup>

This powerful anti-Jewish rhetoric, and the use of antithetical allegories it provoked, was frequently echoed in medieval Europe. Sculptures of *Ecclesia* and *Synagoga* depicted as feminine figures, the latter always blindfolded and drooping to symbolise the obstinate refusal of Jews to recognise the truth of Jesus Christ’s Messiahship, feature in many of the principal Gothic cathedrals of northern Europe (Paris, Metz, Bamberg and Strasburg to name only a few) and it is a common artistic theme in France and Germany. Representations of *Ecclesia* and *Synagoga* appear to have been less common, and to have appeared somewhat later, in the medieval Iberian world than in northern Europe, but they do feature in two altarpieces in the cathedral of Burgos in northern Spain (see Plate 1) as well as in sculptures in León and Barcelona and some artistic productions such as Fernando Gallego’s 1485 Flemish-inspired painting *Salvator Mundi* (currently conserved in the Prado Museum in Madrid).<sup>5</sup> More darkly, the preacher Ferrand Martínez, the instigator of the 1391 anti-Jewish riots in Spain, encouraged his listeners to demolish synagogues because they were gathering places for “the enemies of God and of the Church, which call themselves Jews [...] and their idolatry” and because such buildings were “the synagogues of Satan, in which they especially curse Jesus Christ three times a day and [also] the King and all the Christian people”.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> H. de Romestin, E. de Romestin and H. T. F. Duckworth, *From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 10: *St. Ambrose: Select works and letters*, Oxford, Parker, 1896, p. 442.

<sup>5</sup> See Paulino Rodríguez Barral, *La Imagen del Judío en la España Medieval. El conflicto entre cristianismo y judaísmo en las artes visuales góticas*, Barcelona, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2009, pp. 20-38.

<sup>6</sup> Henry Charles Lea, “Ferrand Martínez and the Massacres of 1391” and “Acta Capitular del Cabildo de Sevilla”, *The American Historical Review*, vol. 1, 1896, pp. 209-219 and 220-225.



PLATE 1: *Ecclesia and Synagoga* in the Capilla del Condestable, Burgos Cathedral, Spain (16<sup>th</sup> century).  
Source: Photography by François Soyer.

In a recent analysis of anti-Jewish literature produced in the early modern Portuguese world, the Brazilian historian Bruno Feitler has noted that the image of the Jew and of the *converso* was constructed over time into “imaginary synagogues” in with social and cultural practices were “intended to [...] create concrete communities in opposition to other ones”.<sup>7</sup> These imagined communities/synagogues could be different according to the purpose of the author. Some authors, those whose aims were primarily evangelical in nature and whose focus was to demonstrate the falsity of Judaism rather than attack Jews/*conversos* as individuals, constructed an imaginary synagogue that was still the personification of the Jews and Judaism and the opponent/opposite of the Christian Church. As late as the final decade of the seventeenth century, for instance, the Italian Jesuit Giovanni Pietro Pinamonti wrote a straightforward polemical treatise entitled “the Synagogue Disabused” (*La Sinagoga disingannata*, Bologna, 1694), a work that was later translated into Portuguese (Lisbon, 1720) and Spanish (Madrid, 1723 and 1733). As such, they were the continuators of a well-established medieval polemical tradition<sup>8</sup>. Others, however, presented the synagogue as a terrifying existential threat to the Church and State in the Iberian world, they demonized Jews/*conversos*, often in proto-racial terms, accusing them of plotting from their

<sup>7</sup> Feitler, *The Imaginary Synagogue*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> See Jeremy Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews. The Evolution of Medieval Anti-Judaism*, London, Cornell University Press, 1982; and *Living Letters of the Law: Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1999.

secret synagogues to subvert Iberian Christianity. In Portugal, the most infamous example of this trend was Vicente da Costa Mattos, author of the *Breve Discurso contra a heretica perfidia do judaismo* (Lisbon, 1622, translated into Spanish and printed in Salamanca in 1631 and Madrid in 1680).

In Portugal, the converts suspected of being judaizers were the descendants of Jewish men, women and children forcibly converted to Christianity by order of King Manuel I (1495-1521) in 1497. The Portuguese monarch, hoping that the reluctant converts would assimilate into the wider Portuguese Christian population, granted them decades of protection from ecclesiastical scrutiny into their religious beliefs and legal persecution. This policy nonetheless failed as the converts and their children and grandchildren were widely suspected (rightly or wrongly) of secretly judaizing and accordingly despised by a large section of the Portuguese population that also resented their economic and social advancement after 1497. In 1506, popular tensions boiled over and resulted in a massacre of between two and four thousand *conversos* in the streets of Lisbon. By 1515, despite his earlier promises to the *conversos*, King Manuel was considering the establishment in Portugal of tribunals of the Inquisition to hunt down secret Jews and weed out the judaizing heresy. It was his successor King John III (1521-1557), however, who oversaw the creation of inquisitorial tribunals that began to operate throughout the kingdom.<sup>9</sup>

By the second half of the sixteenth century, the Portuguese Inquisition had three tribunals in Portugal – operating in the towns of Lisbon, Coimbra and Évora – that divided the country into three separate inquisitorial districts. In contrast to the tribunals of the Spanish Inquisition, which shifted their focus from judaizers to other heretical groups from the second quarter of the sixteenth century onwards (although there were waves of anti-*converso* persecution in Spain in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), the Portuguese Inquisition focused its attention on *conversos* and crypto-Judaism right up until the middle of the eighteenth century. The fact the vast majority of circa 40 000 trials conducted by the Portuguese inquisitors in Lisbon, Coimbra and Évora involved allegations of crypto-Judaism has led the historians Giuseppe Marcocci and José Pedro Paiva to state that the Portuguese Inquisition was “obsessed” with Jews and Judaism.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See F. Soyer, *The Persecution of the Jews and Muslims of Portugal (1496-7). King Manuel I and the End of Religious Tolerance*, Leiden, Brill, 2007; and Giuseppe Marcocci and José Pedro Paiva, *História da Inquisição Portuguesa (1536-1821)*, Lisboa, A Esfera dos Livros, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Marcocci and Paiva, *História da Inquisição Portuguesa (1536-1821)*, *op. cit.*, pp. 49-76.

Portuguese inquisitors actively hunted down suspected crypto-Jews, or 'judaizers', and were convinced of the threat that they represented to the Church and Portugal. Historians, on the other hand, have argued vigorously over the reality of the presence of a large population of secret Jews in Portugal and its overseas territories. In 1969, the Portuguese historian António José Saraiva challenged the idea that the *conversos* were crypto-Jews, preferring to see them as mostly genuine Christians who were persecuted not only because of their Jewish ancestry but also as part of a 'class struggle' between a merchant class largely composed of *conversos* and a secular and ecclesiastical elite that resented the social rise of these *conversos*. This position has generated impassioned debates with those who perceive *conversos* as stalwart crypto-Jews who heroically struggled to maintain their secret faith in the face of inquisitorial persecution. Today, however, most historians accept that the religious identity of the *conversos* was complex and varied, spanning a wide spectrum of religious beliefs and, in some cases, even syncretic.<sup>11</sup>

### *Fazer sinagoga*: The Secret Synagogue in Fact and Fantasy

The inquisitors and a seemingly significant portion of the population in the early modern Portuguese world perceived the religious activity of the *conversos* or 'New Christians' as taking place in secretive synagogues. Indeed, the expression *fazer sinagoga* (or *fazer esnoga*), which can be translated literally as "forming a synagogue", was commonly used in reference to *conversos*. It came to be employed somewhat colloquially in everyday parlance to describe any grouping or assembly of *conversos* that was suspect. By way of illustration, it is used repeatedly in denunciations brought against *conversos* in 1591 during a visit by an inquisitor to the Portuguese settlement of Bahia in Brazil. One witness claimed to have heard rumours that many 'New Christians' gathered in secret "and it was claimed that they *faziam esnoga*" in the house of a *converso* merchant, whilst another stated that in a place in nearby Pernambuco "there was a synagogue where the Jews of that place gathered". One *converso* was arrested and asked during his interrogation to explain why he had jokingly referred to an altarpiece belonging to a Jesuit named João Bras as "the synagogue of João Bras". His responses were the following ones:

<sup>11</sup> For a brief synopsis of the historiographical disputes see Francois Soyer, "It is not possible to be both a Jew and a Christian': *Converso* religious identity and the inquisitorial trial of Custodio Nunes (1604-5)", *Mediterranean Historical Review*, vol. 26, n.º 1, 2011, pp. 81-97.

He was asked what a synagogue is.

He responded that he had heard it said that a synagogue and a mosque are ‘bad things’ (*cousas ruins*) and that it is because of this that he called the house of João Bras a synagogue, because of its bad shape (*ruim feitio*).

He was asked what happens in synagogues, and where are they located [in Bahia].

He responded that he does not know but that he only knows that they are called ‘bad things’.<sup>12</sup>

It is, of course, impossible to know whether the *converso* prisoner was deliberately ‘playing dumb’ in order to avoid revealing supposedly incriminated knowledge of what a synagogue was. Nonetheless, the fact that the inquisitor was almost certainly hoping to entrap the *converso* prisoner in this manner is evidence of the significance that the Inquisition attached to the secret synagogue and its role in the crypto-judaizing of the *conversos*.

There is considerable evidence that those *conversos* who continued to practice Judaism in the wake of the expulsions and conversions of 1492 and 1497 did use private dwellings as places of communal worship. In 1537, for instance, a man denounced various *conversos* who secretly gathered in a house, taking great care to ensure their privacy from outside scrutiny. Similar examples of denunciations to the Inquisition to exist from Portugal, Spain and their overseas possessions.<sup>13</sup> As late 1737, the author of an eighteenth-century manuscript newspaper, notes the arrest by the Inquisition of ten ‘Jewesses’ (i.e. *conversas*) in a house of the Calçada de Santa Ana in Lisbon “who were wearing shawls on their heads so that it appeared that they were in a synagogue”.<sup>14</sup> The reliability of denunciations and sources written by ‘Old Christians’ as evidence is, of course, a thorny issue but there can be little doubt that the image of the ‘secret synagogue’ rapidly

<sup>12</sup> “Sendo perguntado que cousa é esnoga, respondeo que ouvio dizer que esnoga e mesquita são cousas ruins e que por isso apodou com esnoga a dita casa de João Bras, pelo seu ruim feitio. [Sendo perguntado] que é o que se faz nas esnogas, e onde estão? [Respondeu] que não sabe, somente ouviu nomear isto por cousa ruim”. Elias Lipiner, *Terror e Linguagem. Um Dicionário da Santa Inquisição*, Lisboa, Contexto, 1998, pp. 102-104.

<sup>13</sup> For representative examples see David Martin Gitlitz, *Secrecy and Deceit: The Religion of the Crypto-Jews*, Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 2002, pp. 508-513.

<sup>14</sup> “[...] emterão derepente em hũa caza da Calsada de Santa Anna de honde prenderão por ordem do Santo Officio 10 judias e dizem que os primeiros familiares que chegarão acharão luzes azezas e em algumas das prezas se virão veos na cabeça de forma estranha com que parece estavam em sinagoga [...]”. João Luís Lisboa, Tiago C. P. dos Reis Miranda, and Fernanda Olival, *Gazetas Manuscritas da Biblioteca Pública de Évora*, vol. 3 (1735-1737), Évora, Lisboa, CIDEHUS, Edições Colibri, Centro de História da Cultura da Universidade Nova de Lisboa, 2011, pp. 284-285.

developed into a grotesque, fantasized dwelling place of heresy and evil activity in the minds of inquisitors and anti-*converso* polemicists. The belief in the existence of a devilish plot against the Church that was organised in synagogues can be found in the fifteenth century (such as in the work of the Spanish Franciscan polemicist Alonso de Espina) but took on a clearer form in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. According to the Portuguese chronicler Gaspar Correia, the Bishop of the Portuguese Algarve wrote to the king of Portugal in the early sixteenth century to warn him of the disturbing visions of a young girl in his diocese:

[The girl asserted that] God permitted evil earthquakes, plagues and famines to afflict Portugal because of the evils perpetrated by the New Christians who were rumoured to have secret synagogues in Lisbon and that never had any realm been so governed and dominated by New Christians as Portugal now was [since 1497].<sup>15</sup>

A measure of how the popular fear generated by the 'secret synagogue' grew out of proportions can be seen in a denunciation made to the inquisitors in Lisbon on 30 March 1543. Having travelled over four hundred kilometres, three inhabitants of Vinhais in the far north of Portugal claimed that there were only 3 or 4 were Old Christians out of the 50 inhabitants in the locality and that the latter were all heretics who judaized in a synagogue. Whilst there were indubitably many *converso* residing in Vinhais, such numbers are hard to accept uncritically.<sup>16</sup>

An apocryphal correspondence, consisting of two letters allegedly exchanged between the leaders of the Jewish communities of Spain and Constantinople which are clearly forgeries, has the Jews of the Iberian Peninsula complain of their persecution to their correligionaries in the Ottoman Empire. The response of the Ottoman Jews is to advise their Iberian brethren to falsely convert to Christianity in order to infiltrate the Church and royal government as well as the legal and medical professions and destroy Christian society from within. The

<sup>15</sup> "Ela altamente dizia que hos males terramotos pestes e fomes que auya em Purtugall Deus o permytya polos males dos crystaos novos que neste tempo avya fama que em Lysboa tynham synogas secretas e nunqa em nenhu tempo reyno alguu foy tam mandado e regydo por christaos novos como entam Purtugall e se dyse que o bispo do Algarve asy o espreuera a elrrey que nom era nada o que fora pera o que Deus avya de fazer por os males que faziam os cristãos novos em Portugall". Gaspar Correia, *Crónicas de D. Manuel e de D. João III*, ed. J. Pereira da Costa, Lisboa, Academia das Ciências, 1992, p. 304 (fl. 378v).

<sup>16</sup> Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo (ANTT), Inquisição de Lisboa, Livro 1 de denúncias, fls. 195v-197v.



According to a seventeenth-century notary of the Spanish Inquisition and apologist for the statutes of *limpieza de sangre*, the aim of this secret Jewish conspiracy was nothing less than to “build a synagogue within the Church of God, along with all of its Jewish superstitions and ceremonies”.<sup>18</sup>

The obsession of inquisitors and polemicists with crypto-Judaism naturally enough fed an obsessive preoccupation with the presence of secret synagogues. The organised judaizing activity that the inquisition sought to detect went beyond ‘ordinary’ Jewish worship or cultural practices. Medieval anti-Judaism had promoted the belief that Jews ritually desecrated the consecrated host – the infamous host desecration libel – and the notion that *conversos* ritually desecrated hosts or sacred objects was seemingly widespread in early modern Portugal. Beyond routine claims (and accusations) that *conversos* observed the “ceremonies of the Law of Moses” such as keeping kosher or observing the Jewish Sabbath, they were also routinely accused of ritually desecrating crucifixes and consecrated hosts in their secret synagogues. The cases of the *Cristo de la Paciencia* in Madrid, in which a family of *conversos* of Portuguese origins was arrested and prosecuted for flagellating a crucifix that miraculously spoke to them, is perhaps the most (in)famous case (see Plates 3 and 4). Also of note is the host desecration allegation that followed a burglary in the Church of Santa Engracia in Lisbon in January 1630. Such ‘high-profile’ scandals actually hide a profusion of denunciations and allegations of ritual desecration against *conversos* in inquisitorial archives. Their impact can also be measured in the widespread production of artworks commemorating them in the following centuries.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> “[...] pretendiendo en la iglesia de dios erigir su Sinagoga, y las supersticiones y ceremonias Iudaycas della”. Bartolomé Ximenes Paton, *Discurso en favor del santo y loable estatuto de la limpieza*, Granada, Imprenta de Andres de Santiago Palomino, 1638, fl. 4r.

<sup>19</sup> Marta Bustillo, “The episode of the Cristo de la Paciencia and its influence on religious imagery in seventeenth-century Madrid”, *Imagery, spirituality and ideology in Baroque Spain and Latin America*. Ed. Jeremy Roe and Marta Bustillo, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010, pp. 59-70.



PLATE 3: Francisco Rizi, *Profanación de un crucifijo, azotes al crucifijo*, 1647-1651. Source: Prado Museum, Madrid [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons.



PLATE 4: Portuguese *conversos* scourging a crucifix of Christ in Madrid. Source: Francisco de Rojas Nieto, *Vespertinas de los opprobios de la Pasión de Cristo* (Madrid, 1634). Printed with the kind permission of the *Bibliotheca Sefarad*.

In Portugal, the most infamous 'case' of the dismantling of an alleged secret synagogue occurred with the arrest by the Inquisition of Coimbra of António Homem in 1619. The son of wealthy *converso* parents, António Homem was a canon of the cathedral of Coimbra, professor of Canon Law and deacon of the University of Coimbra. In the wake of his arrest, the inquisitors also arrested 131 men and women, including 4 canons of Coimbra cathedral and 52 nuns from 4 different convents. Accused of running a secret synagogue of enormous size, the 60 year-old Homem was burnt at the stake in 1624 after refusing to accept the charges brought against him. Although many historians have appeared willing to accept at face value the claims and charges made by the inquisitors and the testimony extracted under pressure, the reality of the inquisitorial claims and the existence of a massive crypto-synagogue is open to question.<sup>20</sup> Certainly, when the polemicist Vicente da Costa Mattos, writing at the time, related the case to this readers he made it clear that he considered it nothing less than an attempt to establish a secret synagogue in the heart of Portugal's famous university town:

We know from the public proceedings and sentences read out that the apostate Jews of Coimbra had a synagogue in which they carried out all the Jewish ceremonies that are condemned by the Church and they had amongst themselves a High Priest whom they respected and [...] to whom they promised to die as Jews.<sup>21</sup>

As the centre of the 'Jewish plot' against the Church and State, the secret synagogue thus occupied a large place in the Iberian imagination. Wherever there were *conversos*, it was reasoned that there must be a secret synagogue. In a letter sent to Spain in October 1635, the inquisitors of Cartagena de Indias (modern-day Colombia) expressed their confidence in the impending discovery of a *converso* conspiracy and how the confiscated property would help finance their tribunal:

We promise to discover a greater conspiracy of Jews and of greater importance than that of the Inquisition of Peru because all those who are prisoners there have

<sup>20</sup> Antonio José Teixeira, *António Homem e a Inquisição*, Coimbra, Imprensa da Universidade, 1895; and the more recent study of João Manuel Andrade, *Confraria De S. Diogo. Judeus secretos na Coimbra do séc. XVII*, Lisboa, Nova Arrancada, 1999.

<sup>21</sup> "[...] pois se sabe por Autos publicos, & sentenças lidas, que tinham os apostatas Iudeos naturaes della, Synagoga onde fazião as ceremonias Iudaicas, reprouadas da Igreja, & entre si Summo Sacerdote a que respeitauão e [...] em cujas mãos jurauão ao modo judaico de morrer [...]". Vicente da Costa Mattos, *Breve Discurso contra a heretica perfidia do Iudaismo*, Lisboa, Pedro Craesbeeck, 1623, fl. 50r.

relations with those of this city and it is certain that they owe them over a half million [*pesos*]. We presume that in this city there is a synagogue of Jews and by the testimony of Diego López, a mulatto imprisoned as a witch [...] we are sure of this presumption. [...] And thus God has been served to demonstrate His miracles in the Inquisition of Peru and that of Mexico where it is said that a great conspiracy of Jews has been discovered. We promise the same and we ask of your Highness this favour [of authorising the confiscation of arrested *conversos*' property] with which this Inquisition will leave behind its [present financial] misery [...].<sup>22</sup>

The ultimate designation of the secret synagogue as a place of heretical horror for the Church was the fate assigned such alleged places after their discovery. The house of António Homem was destroyed, the land upon which it stood salted and a monument erected to perpetuate its infamy<sup>23</sup>. The 1640 regulations of the Portuguese Inquisition stipulated (*livro III, título II*) that the houses in which particularly obdurate judaizers (*heresiarchas e dogmatistas convictos*) had “formed synagogues” (*faziam sinagogas*) were to be systematically demolished, the ground upon which they had stood was to be salted to prevent the growth of any vegetation and a stone memorial erected to record the infamy of the location.<sup>24</sup>

## A Secret Synagogue in Macau?

The establishment of a permanent Portuguese settlement in Macau from 1557 placed the outpost, along with those in modern-day Indonesia, at the outer limits of the network of Portuguese outposts in Asia. Although a bishopric based in Macau was created in 1576, no tribunal of the Inquisition was ever based there. Instead, Macau fell within the jurisdiction of the inquisitorial tribunal established in Goa when it was created in 1560. The presence of *conversos* in Asia had already been causing concerns long before 1557. As early as 1532, the Portuguese Crown had forbidden the emigration of *conversos* from Portugal to the *Índias* (Asia) without an explicit royal authorization but this prohibition seems to have been bypassed or ignored by many *conversos*. As early as 1539, and before the

<sup>22</sup> Stuart B. Schwartz, “Panic in the Indies: The Portuguese threat to the Spanish empire, 1640-50”, *Colonial Latin American Review*, vol. 2, 2008, p. 175. Translation by Schwartz.

<sup>23</sup> For the voluminous trial dossier of António Homem see ANTT, Inquisição de Lisboa, processo n.º 15421.

<sup>24</sup> José Eduardo Franco and Paulo de Assunção, *As Metamorfoses de um povo: Religião e política nos Regimentos da Inquisição Portuguesa (séculos XVI-XIX)*, Lisboa, Prefácio, 2004, p. 345.

Inquisition was involved, a *converso* was burned at the stake in Goa and the crown was receiving complaints about the numbers of *conversos* in India.<sup>25</sup>

Very similar anxieties are clearly expressed in the letter sent by the Jesuit Francisco de Meneses to Father Everardo Mercuriano, the Head of the Jesuit Order based in Rome, on 15 November 1579:

In China [Macau] we have a population of 600 *vezinhos* [householders] [...]. And especially many marvel to see that there are Portuguese in our town who secretly ask the [Chinese] Governors for housing and a secret place where they could worship, since no one can erect [a building] in our city without the authorization of the Aitao, or rather, the supreme person at the Government. The Aitao has already asked who these men were, who had asked for permission to build places to worship [their God]. But I am not surprised at this since there are [in Macau] than 300 New Christians who usually are not good Christians, since every day they burn them [at the stake] as heretics in Portugal and in India [Goa].<sup>26</sup>

Lúcio de Sousa has argued that this reference to “a secret place where they could worship” is evidence, admittedly limited, of an organised community of judaizing *conversos* in sixteenth-century Macau and of a project to erect a secret synagogue in Macau itself. This assumption has been bolstered by another: that all *conversos* were *judaiizers*. Indeed, this notion is explicitly articulated in a footnote added to a recent work:

In this work we do not generally distinguish between the terms Jew and New Christian. We are of the opinion that the majority of the New Christians did not cease to be Jews in their daily lives, especially when they were far from the kingdom [of Portugal].<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Ana Cannas da Cunha, *A Inquisição no Estado da Índia: Origens (1539-1560)*, Lisboa, Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo, 1995, pp. 250-255.

<sup>26</sup> Joseph Wicki (ed.), *Documenta Indica*, vol. XI, Roma, apud Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu, 1970, p. 731 quoted by Lúcio de Sousa, *The Jewish Diaspora and the Perez Family Case in China, Japan, the Philippines, and the Americas (16th Century)*, Macau, Lisboa, Fundação Macau, Centro Científico e Cultural de Macau, I. P., 2015, pp. 57-58.

<sup>27</sup> “Neste trabalho, em geral, não efetuamos a separação dos conceitos de judeu e de cristão-novo. Somos de opinião de que a maioria dos cristãos-novos não deixavam de ser judeus nas suas experiências diárias, sobretudo quando estavam longe do reino”. Maria de Deus Beites Manso and Lúcio de Sousa, “Fundamentos para o estabelecimento da inquisição em Goa”, *Politeia: História e Sociedade*, vol. 13, 2013, pp. 211-228 (quotation from page 212, n. 2).

To uncritically assume, like the Portuguese or Spanish inquisitors, that crypto-Judaism was a widespread phenomenon on the basis of the trials of the Inquisition is hugely problematic from a historiographical and methodological perspective. The widespread secret practice of Judaism among *conversos* living in Spain, Portugal and their overseas empires continues to generate much debate and controversy. In Portugal, the debate was initiated in 1969, when the Marxist historian António José Saraiva (1917–1993), published his book *Inquisição e Cristãos-Novos* and challenged the established notion that the *conversos* were all secret Jews and argued that they were instead the victims of a class struggle. Since the 1970s, the debate has waxed and waned but most historians now agree that the religious beliefs of *conversos* were complex and defy simplistic labels such as ‘secret Jew/sincere Christian’ or ‘real Jew/false Jew’. The American historian Thomas Glick has described the *conversos* as ‘cultural commuters’, warning that “essentialist definitions of ethnic identity are conducive ultimately to ideologized and misleading conceptions of true and false identities”.<sup>28</sup>

Another early modern source, the Goan inquisitor Rui Sodrinho de Mesquita, complained to his superiors in Lisbon in 1585 about the state of affairs in Macau and what he perceived as the passivity of the bishop in the repression of heretical activity:

It is many years since this [inquisitorial] tribunal [of Goa] have received any prisoner or denunciation from China or Malacca even though those areas are reputed to be aflame [with heresy].<sup>29</sup>

There is limited evidence that, around 1586, an official was dispatched to Macau on an unsuccessful mission to “round up” any judaizing *conversos* in the town. Moreover, in the final decade of the sixteenth century, royal edicts specifically banned the emigration of *conversos* to Asia and ordered the expulsion of

<sup>28</sup> T.F. Glick, “On Converso and Marrano Ethnicity”, *Crisis and Creativity in the Sephardic World, 1391-1648*. Ed. B. Gampel, New York, Columbia University Press, 1997, pp. 59-76. See also Y. Yovel, *The Other Within. The Marranos: Split Identity and Emerging Modernity*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2009; J. Faur, “Four Classes of Conversos: A Typological Study”, *Revue des Études Juives*, vol. 149, 1990, pp. 113-124 and M. García-Arenal, “Religious Dissent and Minorities: The Morisco Age”, *The Journal of Modern History*, vol. 81, 2009, pp. 887-920. For a concise discussion of this issue see Soyer, “‘It is not possible to be both a Jew and a Christian’...”, *op. cit.*, pp. 81-97.

<sup>29</sup> “[...] ha muitos annos que nem da China nem de Malaca vem preso nem denunciação a esta mesa havendo fama de estarem aquellas partes abrasadas [...]”. See Miguel Rodrigues Lourenço, *A Articulação da Periferia. Macau e a Inquisição de Goa (c. 1582-c.1650)*, Lisboa, Macau, Centro Científico e Cultural de Macau, I.P., Fundação Macau, 2016, p. 122.

those already there. The extent to which these decrees were actually enforced is also unclear.<sup>30</sup> Such documents would appear to support the notion that the port city of Macau constituted a safe haven for *conversos* seeking to judaize far from the reach of the Inquisition. As Miguel Rodrigues Lourenço has pointed out, historians of Portuguese Macau have, until very recently, certainly tended to emphasize how the remoteness of Macau effectively favoured the development of a *converso* community because it neutralized the Inquisition's ability to track down and persecute *conversos*. Whilst it is true that there was never a tribunal of the Inquisition in Macau this should not be taken to indicate that the port was beyond its reach. Macau fell within the jurisdiction of the distant tribunal of Goa in India and the Portuguese Inquisition sought to extend its authority to Macau first by making the newly created Bishop of China one of its agents and then, after circa 1599, by installing a commissary who came from one of the various religious orders present in Macau.<sup>31</sup>

It is equally possible to argue, however, that Father Francisco de Meneses's claims may be more representative of the anxiety about judaizing that was gripping the Portuguese monarchy and church than proof of the existence of a large *converso* community. Placing the evidence from Macau within a wider context may be helpful. Throughout the early modern Iberian world, churchmen and royal officials displayed a tendency to grossly exaggerate the number of *conversos*. By way of illustration, officials of the Spanish *Casa de Contratación* in Seville outlandishly claimed, in 1610, that the Portuguese *conversos* outnumbered the Spanish residents of the South American port Cartagena de Indias and, in 1636, the inquisitors of Peru complained that the city of Lima was "overwhelmed" by the "very large" number of Portuguese.<sup>32</sup> Such statements usually do not bear the test of documentary evidence. In Cartagena de Indias, for example, a census of the male population (*vecinos*) of the port in 1630 noted that there were only 154 Portuguese residents out of a total of around 1500.<sup>33</sup> If such exaggerations of the *converso* presence were made in the

<sup>30</sup> Miguel Rodrigues Lourenço, "Injurious Lexicons: Inquisitorial Testimonies regarding New Christians in Macau, Manila and Nagasaki in the Late Sixteenth Century", *The Conversos and Moriscos in Late Medieval Spain and Beyond*. Ed. Kevin Ingram and Juan Ignacio Pulido Serrano, vol. 3, Leiden, Brill, 2015, pp. 95-116.

<sup>31</sup> See Lourenço, *A Articulação da Periferia...*, *op. cit.*

<sup>32</sup> Irene Silverblatt, *Modern Inquisitions. Peru and the Colonial Origins of the Civilized World*, Durham N.C., Duke University Press, 2004, p. 147.

<sup>33</sup> Ricardo Escobar Quevedo, *Inquisición y judaizantes en América española (siglos XVI-XVII)*, Bogotá, Editorial Universidad del Rosario, 2008, pp. 246-250.

Spanish Americas, it is entirely possible that they were also made in reference to the *converso* presence in Goa or Macau.

Anxieties about *conversos* led at least a few Iberian authors to go beyond exaggeration and to venture into the promulgation of outright fabrications. In his *Historia eclesiastica, politica, natural, y moral* of Ethiopia, printed in 1610, the Spanish Dominican Luis de Urreta asserted that “over three hundred” judaizing Portuguese *conversos* from the Portuguese outposts in India had entered the African kingdom of Ethiopia in 1555. Urreta maintained that these *conversos* had sought to foster anti-Portuguese and anti-Catholic feeling in Ethiopia. There is in fact absolutely no evidence to support such claims or even the presence of a judaizing *converso* community in the Abyssinian kingdom. Such claims were controversial even in the seventeenth century.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, writing at the same time as Urreta, the polemicist Vicente da Costa Mattos was articulating an Antisemitic fantasy when he blamed the *conversos* for spreading the practice of circumcision to the African population of Angola.<sup>35</sup>

Although the documentary evidence is scarce due to the disappearance of the majority of the archives of the inquisitorial tribunal of Goa, what does survive hardly supports the notion of an active crypto-Jewish community in Macau. A mere 7 cases of prosecutions of individuals residing in Macau and accused of crypto-Judaism have surfaced out of a total of 45 cases of individuals residing in Macau known to have been conducted in Goa between 1582 and 1653. The number is inordinately small and offers very little evidence of an organised crypto-Jewish community in Macau.<sup>36</sup>

The case study of the trial of the *conversa* Leonor da Fonseca, which has been closely examined by Miguel Rodrigues Lourenço, is symptomatic of the problem facing historians. A resident and native of Macau, Leonor was arrested in 1594 and sent to Goa. Although she was married to an ‘Old Christian’, the fact that her father was a *converso* and that one of her sisters had been arrested as a judaizer many years before, was sufficient to cast a veil of suspicion on Leonor who was prosecuted by the Inquisition for “performing [crypto-Jewish] ceremonies”. The

<sup>34</sup> Luis de Urreta, *Historia eclesiastica, politica, natural, y moral, de los grandes y remotos reynos de la Etiopia, monarchia del emperador, llamado Preste Iuan de las Indias*, Valencia, Pedro Patricio Mey, 1610, pp. 614-615; Fernão Guerreiro, *Relaçam annal das covsas que fizeram os padres da Companhia de Iesus, nas partes da India Oriental, & em alguãs outras da conquista deste reyno nos annos de 607 & 608 & do proceso da conversão & christianidade daquellas partes, com mais hua addiçam á relaçam de Ethiopia*, Lisboa, Pedro Crasbeeck, 1611, fls. 314v-318r.

<sup>35</sup> Mattos, *Breve Discurso contra a Heretica...*, *op. cit.*, fls. 170r-170v.

<sup>36</sup> Lourenço, *A Articulação da Periferia...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 160-166.

witnesses who testified against Leonor included many domestics and slaves, many of whom were of Asian or partly Asian origin. In contrast to the trials of *conversos* conducted in Portugal, where the Inquisition had a stock list of 'Jewish ceremonies' featuring in trial after trial, the claims of heretical belief and behaviour made against Leonor mostly did not conform to these. The bulk of the witness testimony against Leonor focused on her perceived immorality (especially a pregnancy out of wedlock), her failure to conform to conventional Catholic religious observance (such as her poor church attendance on Sundays, her failure to follow Christian fasts or her resorting to popular magic/superstitions for medicinal purposes) as well as some idiosyncratic personal rituals and habits. The most clearly 'Jewish' offense that the witnesses could level at her was that of not working on Saturdays but breaking the Christian Sabbath on Sundays. Eventually, because she refused to confess any crimes of which the inquisitors suspected her, Leonor was condemned to abjure her crime *de vehementi* and sentenced to a short period of detention before she was freed in either 1595 or 1596.<sup>37</sup>

Of course, it could be argued that the scant number of inquisitorial cases in Macau may have been the result of a lack of motivation among the population in the port to denounce members of their small Portuguese community or the inability of the Inquisition to operate effectively over such great geographical distances. Nevertheless, a trend in anti-*converso* discourse clearly existed and this is demonstrated in the following century. The fear of secret synagogues operating in Macau was articulated once more in 1642, during a period of internal strife among the Catholic clergy in Macau. A report written by a Jesuit underlined the seriousness of the situation by noting that the strife was so serious that it was feared that the city would fall into the power of judaizing *conversos* and that "manifest heresies [would thrive] and public synagogues would be opened". The basis for such alarmist claims was that "it has been rumoured for many years that this city of Macau is full of *conversos* and some people even claimed that some clergymen were tainted by that ruinous and accursed [Jewish] blood".<sup>38</sup> Once

<sup>37</sup> *Idem, Ibidem*, pp. 160-166. For a focused socio-cultural analysis of the trial see Miguel Rodrigues Lourenço, "Attitudes and practices of sociability in Macao at the end of the 16th century: the case against Leonor da Fonseca at the Goa Inquisition (1594)", *Bulletin of Portuguese-Japanese Studies*, vol. 17, 2008, pp. 145-165.

<sup>38</sup> "Passarão as Couzas nesta Controuerçia, e desinquietação tanto auante, que com fundamento se temeo chegassem não ssô a armas; mas a manifestas heregias, e as abertas publicas sinagogas: a heregias, por se arreçar, que ouuessem algum herege emcuberto, pella vezinhança, e falla, que ha desta Cidade de Macao com os Reinos de Tunquim, Camboya, e Macassar, tão franquen[t]ados de heregeres; de sinagogas, porque ha muitos annos se murmura [por] alguns indícios estar Esta Cidade muj inçada de

again, rumours and unsubstantiated claims were at the basis (acknowledged even by the source in this case) of the feared ‘secret synagogue’.

## Conclusion

Assumptions should, by their very nature, be the enemy of all historians. The claims made by the Jesuit Francisco de Meneses and inquisitor Rui Sodrinho de Mesquita concerning the existence of a large community of judaizing *conversos* established in Macau and seeking to operate a secret synagogue, must unfortunately continue to be treated as unsubstantiated rumours. When analysed against the well-established trend amongst early modern Spanish and Portuguese writers to vastly exaggerate the size of *converso* communities and the extent of judaizing – or at least the perceived threat of judaizing – a necessary note of caution must arise in the way that the claims of Francisco de Meneses are treated. It is, of course, entirely possible that further study, supplemented by newly discovered documents, may well lend more credence to such claims. Until then, however, we must not assume that Francisco de Meneses had accurate information about the numbers of *conversos* in Macau or that his claims of widespread judaizing reflect the reality. There were, to be sure, *conversos* in Macau but it is to go too far to automatically label them as hardened judaizers and frequenters of a secret synagogue.

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Gente de nação, e não [fa]ltou quem dicesse, auer nella tãobem nesta occazião alguns Relegiozos [toca]dos deste Ruim, e amaldiçoado sangue”. Miguel Rodrigues Lourenço, *Macau e a Inquisição nos séculos XVI e XVII*, vol. II, Lisboa, Macau, Centro Científico e Cultural de Macau, I. P., Fundação Macau, 2012, doc. 38, pp. 221-269. I would like to thank Miguel Rodrigues Lourenço for bringing this document to my attention.