

# Commerce and Exile: Traces of Jewish Diasporas in the Datini Papers

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## ABSTRACT

This essay proposes a preliminary approach to some documents in Italian and Hebrew at the Datini archive. Illustrative cases of what we might call the archaeology of paper, Arnau del Vilar's two manuscript bills and Abram Desforn's letter had lain ensconced in Prato for more than 600 years, and they re-emerge now as fragmentary memories of the exile and loss of these two Jewish converts from Barcelona. They are primary sources for the individual biographies of these victims of the pogroms that spread throughout the Iberian Peninsula towards the end of the fourteenth century, and they document some of the books and objects they managed to take with them into exile. As such they constitute evidence of the forced displacement undergone by different communities in the long history of the Mediterranean. Beyond this, they also illustrate the traces they left behind in commercial archives, as well as their use of trade networks and their administrative-logistic protocols to escape persecution and salvage their property. These papers materialize, in short, the intersection of disciplines like economic history, diaspora studies and semiotics.

## Introduction

After the conquest by King James I of Aragon (1213-1276) of the Kingdoms of Majorca and Valencia, and the subsequent partition of the Kingdom of Murcia between Ferdinand IV of Castile and James II of Aragon early in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the Aragonese crown set about its expansion across the Mediterranean. Portugal, the

other Peninsular kingdom which had ceased to share a frontier with al-Andalus, also launched its own Atlantic expeditions along the Western African coast. Only the Castilian crown maintained direct contact with Muslim territories: the Nasrid Kingdom of Granada and the Marinid Sultanate on the North of Africa, with which it competed for the control of the Strait of Gibraltar.

This situation generated – to use the phrase coined by Mario del Treppo – a common Mediterranean market under the aegis of the Aragonese Crown and articulated upon the ports of Barcelona, Valencia and Palma in Majorca.<sup>1</sup> These shipping and commercial hubs wove a network of routes towards Italy, the North of Africa, the Levant, the Kingdom of Granada and the Atlantic African coast. The Aragonese authorities tried to maintain control over these areas of influence, but they could not stop Genoese and Tuscan merchants to continue with their activities within them. The best known and most profusely documented case is that of Francesco di Marco Datini, whose records have been preserved in the documents at the *Archivio di Stato di Prato*.<sup>2</sup>

The Datini papers in Prato include a small group of documents in Arabic, Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic, which were first identified and registered by Fausto Lasinio in 1880 and Mikel de Epalza in 1964, but never published until fairly recently. Given the limitations of space for the current special issue of the *JEEH*, our essay proposes a necessarily brief and introductory approach to the Hebrew documents, their historical context and the individuals mentioned in them. We shall provide an account of their contents and a preliminary interpretation of their relevance, with a view to providing a

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<sup>1</sup> Mario del Treppo, *I mercanti catalani e l'espansione della corona d'Aragona nel secolo XV*, Naples, 1972, quoted by David Abulafia, "El món mercantil i el comerç català a l'Edat Mitjana", in *Butlletí de la societat Catalana d'Estudis Històrics*, no. 30, 2019, pp. 79-123, p. 114.

<sup>2</sup> The bibliography around the Datini papers, and the significant amount of secondary literature it has generated would be too long to list here. Suffice it to mention the work of Federigo Melis, who founded alongside Fernand Braudel the *Istituto Internazionale di Storia Economica Francesco Datini*, attached since its inception not just to the documents preserved in the archive, but to the work of these eminent historians.

more detailed analysis, alongside their transcription and translation in a future publication.

These documents were for the first time displayed for the general public and made available for the academic community in two simultaneous exhibitions organized by the PIMo Paper in Motion Work Group in January of 2022. They were also first published in print and online in the accompanying catalogue.<sup>3</sup> One of these exhibitions was held on-site at the *Archivio di Stato* in Prato and consisted exclusively of documents from the Datini Archive. The other was a virtual exhibition which sampled documents from archives in different countries written in several of the languages spoken in the late medieval and early modern Mediterranean as well as the North of Europe. Taken as a whole, all these documents bear witness to the multicultural and multilingual mosaic that was the region during this period. They constitute excellent examples of the diverse commercial, personal and intellectual exchanges that they contributed to materialize, as they also illustrate the range of documentary genres and the semiotic protocols employed with these purposes.

They also remind us that documents which were part of the protocols involved in the practices of trade and finance, and whose primary function was therefore of a legal-contractual nature, can become sources of information about practices and phenomena of a rather different sort. They do bear witness not just to the circulation of material goods and financial value, but they also register information about events that could potentially affect the conduct of business.<sup>4</sup> This is why commercial correspondence frequently comes through as a hybrid genre, where information about shipments, payments, loans, re-

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<sup>3</sup> The catalogue, and the essays that accompany it, is available both in print and online. See José María Pérez Fernández and Giovanni Tarantino, with Matteo Calcagni, *Paper in Motion: Information and the Economy of Knowledge in the Early Modern Mediterranean*, Viterbo, 2021; online version at <https://www.paperinmotion.org/>.

<sup>4</sup> Further details on this in José María Pérez Fernández, "Paper in Motion: Communication, Knowledge, and Power. Methods and Case Studies for an Interdisciplinary Approach", in *CROMOHS*, no. 23, 2020, pp. 81-112, <https://doi.org/10.36253/cromohs-12025>; also "Introduction: Information and the Early Modern Economy of Knowledge", in Pérez Fernández, Tarantino and Calcagni, 2021, pp. 21-33.

ceipts, and about the agents who handled them, appears alongside news about relevant current events in the places where the authors of these documents were based. To put it shortly, this sort of commercial correspondence created some of the first international news networks for the private use of the merchants and their companies, who were fully aware of the fact that information was an intangible but also a potentially valuable commodity. This is what turns these documents into important pieces for a reconstruction of the human and social cartography of the Mediterranean during this period, thus contributing to a better understanding of the entanglement among the different persons involved, phenomena, and practices of a very heterogeneous nature. In our case these papers help us trace the predicament of members of ethnic and religious minorities who suffered persecution, and they open a window for the direct contemplation of the emotional distress caused by their exile and dispossession.

The fact that many of these merchants and the agents who worked for them had to travel and settle abroad in distant trading posts turned them into experts in foreign languages. Since they had to engage with their associates and their suppliers among the local populations, one of their most important functions consisted in recording and exchanging written information in languages other than their own. The international networks and branches of the Datini Company, its factors, and its partners, all bear witness to these practices: they established administrative offices and trading posts not just in the Italian Peninsula, but also in Avignon, Barcelona, Valencia and Majorca, and also traded with distant places in the rest of Europe and the Levant. The colourful linguistic and cultural mosaic that was the late medieval Mediterranean frequently materializes in the documents preserved in the Prato archives, such as the *Quaderno di Balle* compiled between 1396 and 1397 by the Datini Company of Majorca. This notebook registers receipts in different hands, which were penned by Catalans, Tuscans, and Jews, each of them using their respective languages.<sup>5</sup> For example, on 30 October

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<sup>5</sup> Archivio di Stato di Prato (ASPo): *Datini*, 1028, fol. 181r, *Quaderno di Balle C*, 1396-1397.

1397, one Magaluf, a Jew in commercial relations with the Datini Company, declared in Hebrew to have received 100 lire. Next to this text, one of the officers of the Datini Company in Majorca, Niccolò Manzuoli, penned a brief translation into Italian that summarised the significance of the original note. This document also confirms that the Datini company had a team of clerks, some of whom were employed in their capacity as translators of texts in different languages. In turn, it also explains the presence in the company's archives of documents entirely in Hebrew like those that we address in our essay, which also confirm that papers originally conceived with an exclusively economic and financial function can contain information of great interest for other disciplines too.

These documents were produced during a remarkably tragic moment in the history of Judaism in the Iberian Peninsula, i.e. the years that followed the pogroms of 1391, which first originated in Seville and soon spread to other cities like Toledo and Burgos in Castile, Valencia and Barcelona on the Eastern seaboard of the Kingdom of Aragon, and then reached as far as Majorca, in the Balearic Islands. The widespread slaughter of 1391 signalled a momentous turning point in the life of Hispanic Jews, since it constitutes the first major step in the long process of the destruction of Peninsular Judaism which culminated in 1492 with the Edict of Expulsion of Isabel and Ferdinand. After 1391 the geography of Hispanic Jewish communities was forever altered. Some of the most important among them simply vanished, or could never return to their previous location and situation – e.g. those in Seville, Toledo, Burgos, Valencia or Barcelona. The pattern of Jewish settlements was profoundly affected after these communities fled cities that came under royal jurisdiction (*ciudades realengas*) and sought to concentrate in smaller cities instead, which were under the jurisdiction of

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On the presence of Jewish and convert merchants and bankers in these areas, see Juan Leonardo Soler Milla, "Los judíos valencianos, el mercado y las rutas mercantiles en el Mediterráneo bajomedieval", in *Revista de Historia Medieval*, no. 15, 2006-2008, pp. 87-108; also Gloria Polonio Luque, "Jueus i conversos en el comerç internacional barceloní de la baixa edat mitjana (1349-1450)", in *Tamid*, no. 9, 2013, pp. 27-50.

local aristocrats or religious authorities. By the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century a significant percentage of the remaining Jewish population had migrated away from the coastal regions and its urban centres – Barcelona, Valencia, Palma – to settle instead around the valley of the river Ebro in the interior of the kingdom of Aragon. As we shall see, the Hebrew documents preserved at the Datini gain a significant relevance within this historical context.

### Arnau del Vilar

“I, the undersigned, acknowledge before Antonio di Guccio, that I am under obligation to deliver on time two hundred and seventeen florins to Francesco di Marco or to Manno di Albizzo in Pisa, thirty days after the arrival of the shipment, which consists of many books. If (God forbid!) I fail to deliver such sum after these thirty days, the aforementioned merchants will take a percentage on my account over the course of the subsequent month. If I cannot be there in two months, they will be then at liberty to sell the books to pay for these amounts. And this was in the month of October, on the tenth day of the year one thousand and three hundred and ninety-three of the computation that we use here in Barcelona. And so that in their power they can use it as proof, and of their right, I have signed my name here, Arnau del Vilar.<sup>6</sup>

The first of these documents, translated above, is a promissory note, or a bill of debt, written in Hebrew for Antonio di Guccio by a person who signs his name as Arnau del Vilar.<sup>7</sup> He undertakes to

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<sup>6</sup> Spanish translation from the original Hebrew by José Ramón Ayaso Martínez, English translation from the Spanish version by José María Pérez Fernández.

<sup>7</sup> ASPo: *Datini*, 1174, cod. 1496 (=N.I.). Paper, 77 x 288 mm. Hebrew in cursive sephardic script, <https://www.paperinmotion.org/paper/acknowledgement-of-debt-in-hebrew/>. We follow here the transcription of the name of the signatory of this document proposed by José Ramón Ayaso Martínez, rather than that proposed by Fausto Lasinio (Arnob Delvilar) in his transcription of the document for the Datini Archive, registered in its records in 1880. This is the only documentary trace left by a person with this name.

pay 217 gold florins (a rather hefty sum for the time) to Francesco di Marco Datini or to Manno degli Albizzi thirty days after the arrival of the goods – “many books” – in Pisa, which he is shipping through the mediation of di Guccio, Datini’s correspondent in Barcelona. If the payment is not made on time by the drawer of this bill (i.e. Arnau del Vilar), then the payees (i.e. Datini or degli Albizzi), can charge an interest consisting in an unspecified percentage of the total amount of the debt for a maximum period of a month after the first due date. The document also establishes that if Arnau del Vilar failed to pay these amounts within this two-month period, the payees would be free to sell the books to redeem his debt. The document was signed in Barcelona on 10 October 1393, and the verso shows a manuscript note by one of Datini’s clerks that records its receipt, most probably in Italy, on 21 November 1393.

Another document in Italian confirms this shipment as it also provides more relevant clues.<sup>8</sup> It is a letter from Antonio di Guccio and Matteo di Miniato, sent to Francesco di Marco Datini and Manno degli Albizzi & Co., from Barcelona to Pisa on October 10<sup>th</sup>, 1393 – just a week after the Hebrew document signed by Arnau del Vilar. The text of the letter confirms the name of the consignee of the said shipment as Arnau del Vilar, described as a Catalan man from Barcelona, of about 40 years of age, who, they add for further detail, is broad-backed and suffers from gout. It also informs that his two bales of fur are sent on the ship of one Sancho Díaz de Basurto and that they contain “many Judaic books”. It finally confirms that they are to be delivered to Arnau once he pays 217 gold florins within 30 days of their arrival, on pain of interest to be collected by issuing a letter of exchange.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Antonio di Guccio and Matteo di Miniato to Francesco di Marco Datini and Manno di Albizzo Agli & Co., Barcelona-Pisa, 10 October 1393 (ASPo: *Datini*, 432/12, cod.100420).

<sup>9</sup> Sancho Díaz de Basurto (also called Sancho Díaz de Bilbao) appears to be the name of a Basque sailor. In another letter, di Guccio and di Miniato inform their superiors in Pisa of the insurance they have taken on the shipment, and value the books in more than 500 florins (ASPo: *Datini*, 432/12, cod. 100418, Antonio di Guccio and Matteo di Miniato to Francesco di Marco Datini and Manno di Albizzo Agli and comp., Barcelona-Pisa, 7 October 1393)

A brief receipt in Hebrew documents that Arnau del Vilar had not just sent his books to Pisa via Antonio di Guccio in Barcelona, but that he had himself left for Italy too, and that once in Pisa he managed to pay for the cost of the shipment and therefore recovered his ‘many Judaic books’. In contrast with the document that he had signed in Barcelona a few weeks before, in which he had used Christian dates, in Pisa Arnau felt apparently more at ease using the Jewish computation system for the date on a legal document: “I acknowledge receipt from Albizzo, merchant in Pisa, of all the books that belong to me, which were sent to him by Antonio di Guccio... In Pisa, in the month of January, the last day, in the year 5154 of our computation” (i.e., 31 January 1394).<sup>10</sup> The fact that the books appear to have been concealed inside the bales of fur mentioned in Guccio and Miniato’s letter also suggests that Arnau might have done so to avoid their detection by the Catalan authorities as they left Barcelona – and/or also just to protect the volumes from the humidity that used to affect such shipments.

The historical circumstances that form the background to this document and its author suggest that Arnau del Vilar must have been one of the Jews who were forced to convert after the series of pogroms that had recently been unleashed upon his community. The riots were particularly violent in Barcelona, where its once prosperous Hebrew community would never recover from the terrible blow it suffered. To cut what must have been a very long and distressing story short, we can tentatively conclude that Arnau used the financial and commercial networks of Francesco di Marco Datini to send

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<sup>10</sup> ASPo: *Datini*, cod. 1497 (=N.II), busta 1174. Paper, 85-91 x 221 mm. Hebrew in cursive sephardic script, <https://www.paperinmotion.org/paper/receipt-for-books-in-hebrew/>. This English translation is based on the Italian version of the original Hebrew document produced by Fausto Lasinio in 1880, provided by Chiara Marcheschi: “Io sottoscritto confesso di aver ricevuto da Albizio mercante di Pisa tutti i libri di mia proprietà inviati a lui da Antonio di Guccio. E perché sia in mano di lui a prova di giustificazione, ho segnato il mio nome. Qui in Pisa nel mese di Gennaio, l’ultimo giorno, nell’anno (5.)154 del nostro computo. Arnau del Vilar.” The transcription of the original document and its translation have both been updated by José Ramón Ayaso Martínez.

his books – and himself as well, either simultaneously or soon after his books – away from his native Barcelona towards exile in Pisa.

Unfortunately, the Datini documents do not identify the nature of the books nor their content. There are a couple of hypotheses. One of them suggests that they may have been Hebrew books for personal or private use that Arnau del Vilar had managed to save from destruction. We do know that the mobs destroyed everything they found on their path. Account books and other administrative documents belonging to Jewish bankers were particularly singled out for destruction.<sup>11</sup> In general, however, the destruction affected any sort of document or book penned in Hebrew, from religious texts to scientific literature, administrative papers and private correspondence, among many others. A great number of remaining fragments from the Hebrew books and documents destroyed in 1391 have in fact been preserved in Girona – this is a group of documents which Mauro Perani has dubbed the “Girona Geniza”.<sup>12</sup> After the pogroms these broken papers were sold in bulk to stationers who used them to reinforce book covers and bindings: they are particularly abundant in the tomes of the notarial protocols now preserved in the provincial archive of Girona.

Hebrew books produced in Catalonia were usually exported for sale in Italy, where they were decorated to suit the local taste. Barcelona in particular was an important hub for the production of books in general – Hebrew and otherwise.<sup>13</sup> This suggests another hypothesis, i.e. that alongside the “many Judaic books” that Arnaut

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<sup>11</sup> Yom Tov Assis, “La participación de los judíos en la vida económica de Barcelona s. XIII-XIV”, in *Jornades d’Història dels jueus a Catalunya. Actes. Girona, abril 1987*, Girona, 1990, pp. 77-92. See also, by the same author “Els jueus de Barcelona i el comerç marítim amb la Mediterrània oriental”, in *Tamid*, no. 2, 1998-1999, pp. 29-71.

<sup>12</sup> Mauro Perani, “The ‘Gerona Genizah’: An Overview and a Rediscovered Ketubah of 1377”, in *Hispania Judaica Bulletin*, no. 7, 2010, pp. 137-173.

<sup>13</sup> Eleazar Gutwirth, “Tendencias en la cultura judeocatalana medieval”, in *Temps i espais de la Girona jueva. Actes del Simposi Internacional celebrat a Girona, 23, 24 i 25 de març de 2009*, Girona, 2011, pp. 139-156. See also Gabrielle Sed-Rajna, “Le Psaultier de Bry, un manuscrit hébreu enluminé (Espagne, XV<sup>e</sup> siècle-Florence, 1489)” in *Revue des Études Juives*, vol. 124 nos. 3-4, 1965, pp. 375-388.

del Vilar shipped to Italy, some others may have been written in Latin script and that none – or at least only some of them – were for personal use, but merely meant for trade. Catalan documents frequently record Jewish artisans as *llibreters* and *lligadors*, i.e. as notebook makers, binders, booksellers and also trading in paper – i.e. as stationers. Their presence in this trade was such that Pope Benedict XIII issued a bull in May of 1415 banning Jews from binding works which mentioned the names of Christ and the Virgin Mary – which amounted to a quasi-blanket ban on book production, since most paratexts included references to Christian figures even if the volumes were not of a religious nature. This ban stood in place until 1418, when Alphonse the Magnanimous removed most of the edicts that severely limited the rights of Jews in the Kingdom of Aragon, first, and then those of Catalonia, Valencia and Majorca.<sup>14</sup> Between 1961 and 1963 Marudell Marimón published a comprehensive record of documents on Jews and converts involved in the book production and trade in Barcelona between the late 14<sup>th</sup> and the early 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. Arnau del Vilar is not mentioned in any of them.<sup>15</sup>

### Abram Desforn

In contrast with the indirect traces provided by Arnau del Vilar's papers, the other Datini document in Hebrew evinces a more explicit story of exile and dispossession after the pogroms of Barcelona in 1391. It is signed by a person whose original Jewish name was Abram Desforn and became Raymond Ballester Desforn after his conversion.<sup>16</sup> The document is addressed to an Italian person of au-

<sup>14</sup> José María Millás Vallicrosa, "Los judíos barceloneses y las artes del libro", in *Sefarad*, no. 16, 1956, pp. 129-136.

<sup>15</sup> José María Marudell i Marimón, "Encuadernadores y libreros barceloneses judíos y conversos (1322-1458)", in *Sefarad*, no. 21, 1961, pp. 300-338; no. 22, 1962, pp. 345-372; no. 23, 1963, pp. 74-103.

<sup>16</sup> ASPo: *Datini*, 1174, cod. 1501. Np., nd. Paper. Hebrew in cursive sephardic script (<https://www.paperinmotion.org/paper/letter-in-hebrew/>). José Ramón Ayaso's transcription and translation of line 37 in the document reads "... your servant Raymond

thority, requesting his mediation for the restitution of some goods that Abram's nephew – Joan Roure (*olim* Samuel Desforn) – had left under the custody of Italian merchants and their agents a few years before. He appears to suggest that one of them, Niccolò del Ammannatto, is retaining the goods without having a legal right to do so. Abram confirms that his nephew is still in Italy and ready to intervene in order to speed up the process.

The document illustrates the enormous difficulties encountered by the Jewish communities affected by the slaughter of 1391 when it came to their return to normalcy, in particular as regards the recent converts and their attempts to recover the goods that had been stolen from them. In 1882 Isidore Loeb published a list with the names of converts who were reclaiming their spoiled goods from the local authorities: Raymond Ballester Desforn and his nephew Joan Roure are among them.<sup>17</sup> The difficulties to recover these goods were not exclusive to Barcelona. As would happen a century later after the promulgation of the Edict of Expulsion of 1492, many would take advantage of the tragic predicament of Hispanic Jews. This behaviour also extended to Italy: as the document suggests some Italian merchants who engaged in business with Catalan Jews saw their situation as an opportunity to take possession of the goods that had been put under their custody.

The wording and the tone of Abram Desforn's letter is rather different from Arnau del Vilar's formal administrative style. This is a mostly personal letter which records a keen plea formulated in

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Ballester Desforn. My name years ago, when I was part of the people of Israel, was Abram Desforn". There is unfortunately no space in this essay for a full transcription and a translation of this and other relevant texts. We are currently working on a longer and more detailed essay which will also include these and other related primary sources.

<sup>17</sup> Isidore Loeb, "Liste nominative des Juifs de Barcelone en 1392", in *Revue des études juives*, vol. 4, no. 7, 1882, pp. 57-77. The document is a list of 129 Jews who had converted after the riots (which had seen the murder of more than 250 members of their community), with their new Christian names and their original Jewish names. Samuel Desforn is number 35 in the list ("Johanne Roure *olim* Samuel des Forn"), and Abram is number 85 ("Raymundo Ballistarii *olim* Abraam des Forn").

rather despairing terms. Abram describes himself as “stripped and naked” and addresses a powerful personage (probably Falduccio di Lombardo) whose assistance he earnestly and most insistently begs for the restitution of his property.<sup>18</sup> These possessions include several different goods and artefacts inside a coffer and a *caratello* (i.e., a wooden cask or container) which, as mentioned above, had been deposited by Abram’s nephew with Niccolò del Ammannatto in Pisa some four years earlier.<sup>19</sup> He requests the restitution of this property through the mediation of another unidentified person whose name appears to be Johan, Joan, or Giovanni Shefardi. The second part of the letter suggests that some other goods had been deposited with the addressee a few years before, and Abram expresses his gratitude to him for not having sold it without his prior consent. The verso of the document bears the names of the two Italian correspondents of the Datini company in Barcelona who also intervened in the shipment of Arnau del Vilar’s ‘many Judaic books’ to Pisa, i.e., Matteo di Miniato and Antonio di Guccio.

Desforn provides a short inventory of the goods which he is trying to recover through the administrators of his addressee with a view to having them delivered to Francesco di Prato (i.e., Francesco Datini). These goods include, *inter alia*, coral, saffron, a copy of the *Sefer Ha’ibbur* (a treatise on the calendar by Abraham Ibn Ezra), a Hebrew book of law (*Sefer Dinin*) bound in wooden boards covered in red leather, and a *megillah* (i.e., a scroll with the Book of Esther) with a wooden *yad* (a pointer used by the reader to follow the text during the reading of the Torah). The language he uses suggests that Abram Desforn must have been a well-educated person, who was

<sup>18</sup> The original Hebrew phrasing for “stripped and naked” (רשא לכמ סורעו ללוש ינא יכ) (היה) is a quotation from the *Book of Micah* 1.8.

<sup>19</sup> Niccolò del Ammannatto was Datini’s partner and brother-in-law through his marriage with Francesca Bandini, sister to Datini’s wife Margherita. Desforn writes to Falduccio, and he begs him to get in touch with Niccolò dell’Ammannato Tecchini in Pisa, to inquire where these goods are deposited. The names of more intermediaries and previous interlocutors emerge as the letter unfolds, both Italian administrators in the Datini company as well as members of Desforn’s extended family in Pisa.

not just conversant with Scripture and rabbinic literature but had also copied in his own hand a manuscript of Abraham Ibn Ezra's treatise on the calendar. This is rather unusual because it was a task which called for skills in calligraphy as well as good knowledge of the subject. A *mitzvá* did establish that all adult Jews should copy a *sefer torah*. De facto, however, not even the most prominent families within Jewish communities did so: most of them hired a professional copyist instead and then had their son pen just the final words on the scroll. We should add that the books listed in this brief inventory might not have necessarily been personal belongings, but goods meant for trade, as were the saffron and the coral also listed in the document. Coral in particular was a highly profitable luxury item which was frequently traded by Jewish merchants either as a raw product or as a manufactured object – e.g. as buttons, or other sorts of ornaments. Marudell i Marimón published in 1956 and 1957 a series of contractual documents that prove that the extraction of coral, its manufacture and commerce were common activities among Catalan Jews, in particular those who plied their trade in Barcelona.<sup>20</sup> This lucrative business did in fact help the Jews of the Catalan capital confront both the restrictions imposed by the authorities and the competition from Christian merchants and bankers during the 14<sup>th</sup> century and afterwards.<sup>21</sup>

### **Administrative Papers, Semiotics and Diaspora Studies: from the Desfor of Barcelona to the Bolognese Sforno?**

One of the few remaining testimonies by a direct witness of the

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<sup>20</sup> José María Marudell i Marimón, "La contratación laboral judaica y conversa en Barcelona (1349-1416). Documentos para su estudio", in *Sefarad*, no. 16, 1956, pp. 33-71, 369-398; no. 17, 1957, pp. 73-102.

<sup>21</sup> On this see Anna Rich, "Coral, Silk and Bones. Jewish Artisans and Merchants in Barcelona between 1348 and 1391", in *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, no. 53, 2009, pp. 53-71. See also Meritxell Blasco Orellana, José Ramón Magdalena Nom de Déu, and Juliette Sibón, "La pinças (carnet personnel) de Mordacays Joseph (1374-1375), corailleur juif de Marseille", in *Revue des Études Juives*, no. 175, 2016, pp. 251-307.

pogroms in Barcelona reports that the riots started at three pm on August 5<sup>th</sup> 1391 and that the pillage and slaughter continued for five days until August 10<sup>th</sup>.<sup>22</sup> Some Jews managed to find refuge in the *Castell Nou* (i.e. the New Castle), which had been built upon one of the originally Roman gates in the ancient wall of the city: our two Desforns may have been among them. When the authorities forced them to leave this precinct the only option for those who wanted to stay alive was conversion and after their baptism they took the names of their godfathers: Abram Desforn and two other Jews (Samuel Alietzer and Isaac Mahir) took the name of a respected lawyer, Raimundo Ballester.<sup>23</sup> Many of those who had converted while still in the Peninsula left their Christian names behind and recovered their Jewish identity once they had fled into the relative safety of exile.

The pogroms of 1391 triggered an important first phase in the long history of the diaspora of Hispanic Jews all over the Mediterranean, which specially affected those who had so far lived in territories belonging to the Aragonese crown such as Valencia, Majorca and Catalonia. In fact, the rabbis of the first generation of Jews expelled in 1492 still remembered in Egypt what they called the “diaspora of the Catalans.” It is obvious that Catalan Jews were just one among the several groups of Hispanic Hebrew exiles who arrived in Egypt after 1391, but their number and importance must have been so great that all the diaspora generated after 1391 is referred to as the “exile of the Catalans.”<sup>24</sup> Chiara Ravera and Anna Rich-Abad mention the case of magister Benedictus de Ologar, a physician from

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<sup>22</sup> The document is preserved at the Library of El Escorial, and was published by Fidel Fita i Colomé in his “Estrago de las juderías catalanas en 1391. Relación contemporánea”, in *España Hebrea*, no. 1, 1889, pp. 166-179. We are currently working on a forthcoming publication about these and other as yet unpublished documents among the Datini papers which include new eyewitness accounts of the riots reported by Datini agents in Barcelona.

<sup>23</sup> Fita i Colomé, p. 178.

<sup>24</sup> This is the expression used by rabbi David ibn Zimra, who was born in the Iberian Peninsula around 1479, was expelled with the rest of his family, and died in Safed in 1573 (Gutwirth 2011, p. 152).

Barcelona, who first converted and whose presence is subsequently documented in the Island of Chios in 1404.<sup>25</sup> Members of the Hebrew communities in Valencia and Majorca had abundant contacts in the North of Africa, which thus became their most frequent destination after their diaspora: one of them was the famous Talmudist Isaac ben Sheshet Perfet, who although born in Barcelona, was in Valencia at the time of the slaughter. Like so many others, he was first forced to convert and ended up by leaving the Iberian Peninsula and settling in Algiers, where he died in 1408.

Members of the Desforn family appear in documents as early as the thirteenth century.<sup>26</sup> Although theirs was not one of the few great families who had historically run the institutions in the *aljama* of Barcelona, some of its members had been prominent administrative officers within the council which governed their community and as such their names and signatures feature as witnesses in important documents. The Desforn therefore enjoyed a certain prestige in Barcelona and were involved in international finance and trade which reached as far as the Eastern Mediterranean. As such, they must have been well educated in Hebrew and the great texts of the Jewish tradition – as proved by Abram’s letter. This document was very obviously written in haste and under great distress: there are omissions, words that have been crossed out, and others which have been added between the lines on a second redaction. There are frequent repetitions of Abram’s keen plea, and of the names of the people involved alongside detailed references to the brief inventory of objects that he was trying to identify and recuperate. In his own words, Abram had no material possessions other than those he had sent to Italy four years before, when he resorted to the commercial and administrative networks of the Datini company and its agents.

<sup>25</sup> Chiara Ravera and Anna Rich-Abad, “Benedictus’ Summer’s Night Dream: The Journey of a Jew from Barcelona to Chios (1391-1404)”, in *Cultural and Social History*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2022, pp. 461-474.

<sup>26</sup> With their different spellings, i.e.: de Furno, dez Forn, דרופ צד, דרופ צד. See Yitzhak Baer’s *Die Juden im christlichen Spanien*, vol. I, Aragonien und Navarra. Berlin, 1929. The Datini document spells the surname as Desforn. דרופ צד.

From the contents of the letter we also learn that Desforn had previously, and repeatedly, sent a certain number of letters – at least three of them – in his attempt to locate first and then recuperate his property by its delivery to Francesco di Marco Datini, whose reputation, he emphasises, is that of an honourable and respectable person who can be trusted.

In his account of the steps that Desforn has taken to ship his goods first and then try to secure their recovery, he also describes the protocols that were used for the documents involved in this sort of practice – also exemplified by Arnau del Vilar’s more formal papers. One of them is his indirect reference to one of the norms that regulate the conduct of these processes, which establishes that goods belonging to other people could not be delivered unless there was a document written by the recognizable hand of someone who is authorized to do so.<sup>27</sup>

Merchants and bankers kept samples of authorized personal signatures and hands in each of their different branches to authenticate the documents that they exchanged, which frequently carried significant performative power, either because they were formal contracts, bills of credit (which could codify a certain amount of monetary value), or any other sort of document that empowered its carrier to conduct business of great consequence for the parties involved. They were of course not as sophisticated as those we employ today, when we have electronic certificates, block chain authentication, and biometric security protocols, but still, complex international commercial and financial networks such as those of Francesco Datini and his partners also required authentication protocols to perform the administrative and contractual functions that were vital for the effective conduct of business. These protocols were indispensable to secure the exchanges of goods, financial value, information

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<sup>27</sup> “Michele di Simone already wrote to me to tell me that you would never give them to anybody unless he wrote for your excellency and for his excellency Antonio di Guccio a *document in his own hand*” (italics are *ours*).

and in general legally binding documents of all sorts.<sup>28</sup> As seen above with di Guccio's document, these protocols could simply consist in a physical description of the person who was empowered to collect the goods, frequently in combination with his presentation of a letter in one of the company's authenticated hands.<sup>29</sup>

This letter in Italian and Arnau's two documents in Hebrew confirm that the protocols employed for the safe exchange of information recorded in such papers wove the communicative-semiotic networks that generated and sustained not just commercial and financial traffic, but also cultural exchanges of many different sorts. This included facilitating means of escape for members of persecuted minorities – or at least for those who could afford the cost of using them.

Like Arnau del Vilar's documents, Abram Desforn's letter tells a story of deprivation and exile, confirmed by his presence and that of his nephew in the list of Jewish converts who demanded the restitution of the goods that had been taken from them. It would appear, therefore, that Abram and Samuel must have recovered at least some of their property in Barcelona sometime around 1392 or maybe later, and that they succeeded in having it sent to Italy, which is why the former was now pleading with the merchant of Prato to get it back. This letter proves that Abram's situation was rather more desperate than that of Arnau del Vilar, who at least managed to recover his many books and possibly find refuge in Italy, as proven by the receipt in Hebrew that bears his signature.

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<sup>28</sup> For more details on how economic and financial treatises described these practices and their protocols, see José María Pérez Fernández's essay (*"The Spirit of Trafficke: Paper, Semiotics, and Finance"*) in this special issue. For samples of protocols and formulas in different periods, places and languages see the catalogue of the exhibition mentioned in our introduction (Pérez Fernández et al., 2021, <https://www.paperinmotion.org/>).

<sup>29</sup> "The carrier of this letter will be Arnau del Vilar, a Catalan from Barcelona, a man of about 40 years of age, suffering from gout, and broad-backed". The original runs thus: "La portatore di questa lettera sarà Arnao dal Vilar, chatalano di Barzalona, huomo di età di circha 40 anni cho lla ghotà, scherna grossa" (ASPo: *Datini*, 432/12, cod. 100420, Antonio di Guccio and Matteo di Miniato to Francesco di Marco Datini and Manno di Albizzo Agli and comp., Barcellona- Pisa, 10 ottobre 1393).

We do not know what may have become of Abram Desforn beyond what his own letter tells us, but although there is no direct primary source that can prove this, it is not illogical to think that once in Italy, his nephew Joan Roure may have finally decided to settle there and recover his Jewish identity as Samuel Desforn. In fact, Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli documented the presence in Bologna of a Jewish immigrant from Barcelona in 1407 whose name was Samuel Sforno.<sup>30</sup> This Samuel Sforno could very well be Abram Desforn's nephew, who, as the letter says, was already in Pisa just a few years before. If this is the case, then Samuel Desforn and his uncle Abram Desforn provide the connection between the previous Iberian generations of this family, and those who followed their forced exile in Italy. This particular diaspora would then mark a founding moment for a prosperous family of newly naturalized Italian Jewish bankers, some of whose members would gain a certain prominence, like Obadiah Sforno (ca. 1470-1550), physician, philosopher and prolific exegete of Scripture, who had Johannes Reuchlin among his students in Rome.

Our research on these diasporas and personal connections is still a work in progress, with new documents currently under investigation, but the existing primary sources prove that the intersection of commercial administrative papers, their semiotic protocols, and the personal information registered in them constitute fundamental building blocks for the reconstruction of important episodes in both economic history and diaspora studies.

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<sup>30</sup> Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli, "Ebrei, famiglie e città. Gli Sforno 'di Bologna'", in *Zakhor. Rivista di storia degli ebrei d'Italia*, no. 2, 1999, pp. 59-77, p. 64.