

# Messianic Expectations and Portuguese Geographical Discoveries: Yohanan Alemanno's Renaissance curiosity\*

*Fabrizio Lelli*

University of Salento, Lecce

Between the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth centuries, the movement of Jewish exiles who travelled to and remained in Italy (for longer or shorter periods) – after the persecutions perpetrated against them in the North of Europe, Provence and the Iberian Peninsula – altered the demographic composition of the small Italian communities, which gradually assimilated and integrated the new traditions that arrived.<sup>1</sup> Under this perspective, the interest of Renaissance Italian Judaism in Portuguese culture seems to depend essentially on the meeting of a great number of exiles from the Atlantic nation in the second half of the fifteenth through the middle of the sixteenth century.

For example, intellectuals of Portuguese origin were already active in the Aragonese Kingdom of Naples before the 1497 mass exodus of Jews from Portugal. The great exegete, philosopher and statesman Isaac Abravanel (1437-1508), quoted in contemporary Hebrew documents as "*ish Portugal*" (Portuguese),<sup>2</sup> even though he had lived for many years in Spain before arriving in Naples, was among the exiles of 1492. The Portuguese grammarian, philosopher and poet Moses ibn Habib was already a resident of Naples in 1492. As many other exiles, Abravanel and Ibn Habib contributed with

---

\* I owe special thanks to James Nelson Novoa for translating into English the first draft of this article and to Seth Jerchow for revising its present version.

<sup>1</sup> See R. BONFIL, *Gli ebrei in Italia nell'epoca del Rinascimento*, Florence 1991, 55-59.

<sup>2</sup> See ELIYYAH HAYYIM BEN BINYAMIN DA GENAZZANO, *La lettera preziosa (Iggeret hamidot)*, ed. by F. Lelli, Florence 2002, 154.

their vast import of Iberian culture to the renewal of the Italian Jewish tradition.

At the same time, however, both were able to integrate elements from local humanist tradition in their thought. Moses ibn Habib, in his poetical work *Darke no'am* (Delightful Ways, composed in Bitonto, Apulia), addressed the problem – dear to humanists – of the authority and the role of Biblical poetry.<sup>3</sup> Isaac Abravanel, in his exegetical works composed in Monopoli (likewise in Apulia), demonstrates the profound influence of Florentine and Venetian humanism.<sup>4</sup> Among the exiles of 1497, the Portuguese family Ibn Yahya produced several intellectuals, the most important being David, the founder of a Rabbinical school in Naples,<sup>5</sup> and his nephew Gedalyah (1526-1587), author of the historical work *Sbal-shelet ha-qabbalah* (The chain of tradition), which gives us important information on the anti-Jewish persecutions in Portugal.<sup>6</sup>

A major feature appearing in the literary production of the above-mentioned authors, and especially in Isaac Abravanel's works, was a special bent to see contemporary history fraught with strong messianic connotations. Some scholars think that this interest shown by Iberian Jews in the end of times was caused by the great number of conversions to Christianity in the last decades of the fifteenth century. Since most of the *conversos* kept practicing their old religion in secret, they were obliged to lead a double-life – Christian in public and Jewish in private. This conflict would then result in the emergence of a strong expectation in the messianic advent. The

---

<sup>3</sup> See J. KUGEL, "The Influence of Moses ibn Habib's *Darkhei No'am*", in B.D. Cooperman (ed.), *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century*, Cambridge, Mass., 1983, 308-325.

<sup>4</sup> See B. NETANYAHU, *Don Isaac Abravanel, Statesman & Philosopher*, Philadelphia 1953; E. LAWEE, *Isaac Abravanel's Stance Toward Tradition. Defense, Dissent, and Dialogue*, New York 2001.

<sup>5</sup> See A. MARX, "Glimpses of the Life of an Italian Rabbi of the First Half of the Sixteenth Century", *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 1 (1924), 605-616.

<sup>6</sup> See A. DAVID, "The Spanish Expulsion and Portuguese Persecution Through the Eyes of the Historian R. Gedalya ibn Yahya", *Sefarad* 56 (1996), 45-59.

messianic figure was seen as a sort of champion of the internal struggles of the New Christians, who guaranteed them the possibility of persisting in their Jewish consciousness and activities.<sup>7</sup>

It is not by chance then that the self-proclaimed Messiah Solomon Molko was a Portuguese *converso*, who, after reconverting to Judaism before leaving Portugal, on arriving in Italy in the late 1520s, raised expectations about universal redemption among the communities of our peninsula.<sup>8</sup>

As a matter of fact, Italian Judaism had started relating the Portuguese world with the preoccupation with redemption even before the mass conversions of the last decades of the fifteenth century. This concern with messianism had been awakened by the great discoveries of the Portuguese navigators. The sailors of King John II, returning from their voyages along the coast of Africa, brought back stories about Jewish kingdoms beyond those seas. As we will observe further on, both from a chronological and conceptual perspective, the revival of geographical investigation at the end of the fifteenth century was strongly associated, both in Christian and Jewish society, with the hope of messianic redemption.<sup>9</sup>

Throughout the fifteenth century, the general context of political instability of Mediterranean Europe, which felt the threat of the Ottoman expansion, had led Christians and Jews to seek a response to the doubts related to the dating of the end of the world. It was thought that the story of Man had reached its final point, and that

---

<sup>7</sup> See I. ROBINSON, *Abraham ben Eliezer Halevi: Kabbalist and Messianic Visionary of the Early Sixteenth Century*, Ph.D. Diss., Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., 1980, 18.

<sup>8</sup> On this subject, mention should be made of the establishment of a "marrano" press in Ferrara by the Portuguese exile Abraham ibn Usque (Duarte Pinel): see C. Roth, "The Marrano Press at Ferrara, 1551-1555", *Modern Language Review*, 38 (1943), 303-317.

<sup>9</sup> Geographical discoveries were associated to messianic interpretations of history also in Christian milieus. Christopher Columbus' search of the "Western Indies" had a definite messianic intent: see, e.g., D. S. Katz and R. H. Popkin, *Messianic Revolution: Radical Religious Politics to the End of the Second Millennium*, New York, 1999, *passim*. A messianic interpretation of the discovery of America appears, for instance, in the notes to the Giustiniani Polyglot Psalter, published in Genoa in 1516 (note D on Psalm 19).

soon the Messiah would return (in Christian circles) or come for the first time (in Jewish circles) in order to decree the end of times.<sup>10</sup>

Moved by this common sentiment, Jews and Christians sought the exact date of the arrival or return of the Messiah. In Italy suppositions were ventured on the basis of the works by the Spanish astronomer Abraham Zacuto (1452-1515 ca.), the court astronomer of the King of Portugal before 1497. Jews and Christians agreed that the year 1490 or the year 1503 were the likely dates for the beginning of messianic age. These were the same dates accepted by Isaac Abravanel as well as by Yohanan Alemanno, an Italian Jewish thinker on whose production this article centers. Another proposed date was 1531, and the arrival in Italy of Solomon Molko towards the end of the second decade of the sixteenth century had the effect of reinvigorating the hopes of Jews in that sense. Solomon Molko, as already mentioned, was a Portuguese convert who was induced to embrace the faith of his fathers after the visit to the court of a noted personality of messianic stature: David Reubeni.

Reubeni claimed to be a Jewish prince who came to Europe from the African or Arabic desert, through the Land of Israel, in order to meet the Pope – and subsequently the King of Portugal – with the intent of requesting the support of the Portuguese army to wage war against the Muslims. The link between the messianic David Reubeni, Africa, Italy, and Portugal will be clarified in the following paragraphs.

An extended opinion among Medieval Jews was that the Messiah would appear on the scene of history only when the ten tribes of Israel would return to the land of Israel. The tradition of the Oriental descendants of the ten tribes (deported by Salmanassar of Assyria in the seventh century B.C.E.) from the Northern Kingdom of Israel was integrated with that of the "sons of Moses," a population of Jewish origin from Asia who claimed to be distant descendants of the prophet of Sinai.<sup>11</sup> Their manifestations in history

<sup>10</sup> See ROBINSON, *Abraham ben Eliezer Halevi*, 26-27.

<sup>11</sup> See A. TOAFF, "Il Sambation, fiume vivente", in *idem*, *Mostri giudei*, Bologna 1996, 29-48. E. ARTOM and A. DAVID, *From Italy to Jerusalem. The Letters of Rabbi Obadiah of Bertinoro and the Land of Israel*, Ramat Gan 1997, 86 and notes.

would give way to the process of the return of the Jewish people into the land of Israel, which in turn would trigger the long expected messianic event. It may be worthy of note, in the context of this article, that in the messianic writings of the "Portuguese" Abravanel the legend of the hidden tribes of Israel was, in the words of Benzion Netanyahu, "transformed from a phantom into a factor."<sup>12</sup>

Long before Abravanel, however, speculation about the ten tribes had represented an important issue of debate for Jews and Christians. On the basis of Medieval Hebrew travelogues, the descendants of the ten hidden tribes had been discovered by Western travellers in areas located between India and Central Asia. They had been related to Tartar tribes as in the widespread story of the Khazars, dating back to the eighth century, or with the Mongols, in the thirteenth century, when Eastern armies had conquered the territories of the Abbasid caliphate and had approached the Holy Land, which in those days was still in the hands of the Christian Crusaders. Since it was known that the period of messianic salvation would take its start from a war between Christians and Muslims, any rumour about a major conflict between the two faiths was considered as worthy of interest against the background of the Messianic advent.

The ten tribes had been also related in the late Middle Ages to a major Christian tradition, that imagined the existence of the legendary monarch Prester John, said to be of Jewish origin. His rule was said to extend over a vast area located in India, although this geographical term actually defined the Indian sub-continent and Southern Arabia along with Ethiopia. This identification was due to the lack of precise geographical information on the "Southern edges of the earth" and to the widespread idea that the Indian Ocean was smaller than what it actually is. This made it possible to consider all countries facing the Ocean as virtually one only region.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> NETANYAHU, *Don Isaac Abravanel*, 229.

<sup>13</sup> See, on this, the text mentioned by Alemanno, below. J. LE GOFF, *L'Occidente medievale e l'Oceano Indiano: un orizzonte onirico*, in *Mediterraneo e Oceano Indiano. Atti del VI Colloquio Internazionale di storia marittima*, Florence 1970, 243-273.

The various expeditions undertaken by Portuguese in the fifteenth century to circumnavigate Africa opened new commercial routes, but they had, in addition, the function of transmitting more exact information on the lost tribes of Israel in India and Ethiopia.<sup>14</sup> On the one hand, the Indian Jews of Shinkli (or Shingli, identifiable with Cranganore [Kodungallur], Kerala), on the other those of Ethiopia – the Falashas – were considered descendants of the survivors of the Northern Kingdom. With their colonial expeditions, the Portuguese were the first Westerners to re-establish contact, not only with the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia (once linked to Byzantium but then isolated for centuries on account of the Islamic expansion in surrounding lands), but also with the rest of this Northern Kingdom in India. I would like to stress that the interest in the lost tribes constituted one of the principal aims of the Portuguese expeditions, which also claimed to look for the lands of Prester John. The latter was eventually identified, by the Portuguese themselves, with the Negus of Ethiopia.<sup>15</sup>

David Reubeni's project could very well have been conceived in the context of the reaffirmation of diplomatic contacts between Ethiopia and Portugal. If we allow for his Ethiopian origin, which could be demonstrated on the basis of contemporary documents, the reason for his proposal to the King of Portugal could be understood as a way to involve him in his enterprise of regathering the people of Israel into their land of origin, since this would accelerate the eschatological conflict between Muslims and Christians (so well described by Isaac Abravanel), necessary for the appearance of the Messiah.<sup>16</sup> According to an ancient Jewish tradition, important even

---

<sup>14</sup> See M. KAYSERLING, *Historia dos Judeus em Portugal*, trad. Gabriele Borchardt Corrêa da Silva/Anita Novinsky, Introd/notes, Anita Novinsky, São Paulo, 1971, 76-77.

<sup>15</sup> See LE GOFF, *L'Occidente medievale e l'Oceano Indiano*, 255. On the legend of Prester John see F. M. ROGERS, *The Quest for Eastern Christians*, Minneapolis 1962; on the circulation of this legend among Italian Jews see: E. ULLENDORFF and C.F. BECKINGHAM (eds.), *The Hebrew Letters of Prester John*, Oxford 1982; M. Bar-Ilan, "Prester John: Fiction and History", *History of European Ideas*, 20/1-3 (1995), 291-298.

<sup>16</sup> On Reubeni as a Falasha Messiah see A. TOAFF, "Il messia negro", in *Mostri giudei*, 49-63.

in the origins of Christianity, the responsibility of the first Messiah, son of Joseph, was to introduce the arrival of the last Messiah, son of David.<sup>17</sup> It is no coincidence that David Reubeni presents himself as a son of Joseph, and, as we shall see, the texts linked to the Medieval tradition and the accounts of Portuguese explorers often speak of Jewish Kings with this name.<sup>18</sup>

Probably inspired by news conveyed by the Portuguese explorers, Reubeni decided to travel to Italy, where, following the Jewish messianic tradition, he would meet with the Pope. He was received by Clement VII, a member of the Medici family (known for granting special privileges to Jews), which had strong commercial connections with Portugal, and contributed in 1487 to the mission of the Portuguese navigators Covilhã and Paiva en route towards India and Ethiopia.<sup>19</sup> After having obtained the permission from the Pope, Reubeni directed himself towards the ultimate goal of his trip: Portugal. On being received at the court of John III, it would seem that with his preaching he induced a secretary of the King, Diogo Pires, to reaffirm his Jewish faith and change his name to Solomon Molko. These events took place in the 1520s, but were preceded by an intense speculation on the advent of the Messiah, which, especially in Italy, attained heretofore unknown levels of activity.

Among the Italian Jews of the generation that preceded the alleged Messiah Reubeni, Yohanan Alemanno (1435 – after 1506)

---

<sup>17</sup> On ancient Jewish messianism see M. IDEL, *Messianic Mystics*, New Haven and London, 1998, chapter 1.

<sup>18</sup> On David ha-Reuveni see: U. CASSUTO, "Chi era David Reuveni?", *Rassegna Mensile di Israel*, 2 (1969), 59-84: 73-74; A. DAVID, "A Letter from Jerusalem at the Beginning of the Ottoman Rule on the Land of Israel", in *Chapters on the History of Jerusalem at the Beginning of the Ottoman Age*, Jerusalem 1979, 39-60 (in Hebrew); the Hebrew text of David ha-Reuveni's diary was published by A. NEUBAUER, *Medioeval Jewish Chronicles and Chronological Notes*, Oxford 1895, I, 133-223, e da A. Z. AESKOLY, *Sippur David Re'uveni*, Jerusalem 1940; Reuveni's text was published in Italian by L. SESTIERI, *Un ebreo d'Arabia in missione segreta nell'Europa del '500*, Genoa 1991.

<sup>19</sup> See KAYSERLING, *Historia dos Judeus em Portugal*, 76-77. See also below, 16-17.

seems to have been especially interested in knowing about what happened to the lost tribes, and uncovering information about the country of Prester John,<sup>20</sup> on the basis of both traditional sources as well of news coming from Portuguese sailors.<sup>21</sup>

Yohanan Alemanno is certainly one of the characters who best expresses the versatility of Italian culture in the humanistic age: during his life, spent in various centres in Northern and Central Italy, he sought after ancient and contemporary sources, Jewish and non-Jewish, in which he could philologically found his own affirmations of science and faith, studying most of the same disciplines as the humanists, and frequenting the company of Christian intellectuals with whom he shared information and texts of common interest.<sup>22</sup>

The messianic question is an important one for Alemanno.<sup>23</sup> In particular, in his notebook (*Liqqutim*),<sup>24</sup> he transcribed some information on the lost tribes. Alemanno's intent was evidently that of reconstructing the history of geographical research on the discovery of mythical tribes in order to compare traditional Hebrew sources with the recent results of Portuguese discoveries, about

---

<sup>20</sup> In the second decade of the sixteenth century Abraham Farissol, in his *Sefer iggerot orbot 'olam* (Book of Travelogues), deals with the country of Prester John and identifies it with the Indian coast of Malabar: see D. B. RUDERMAN, *The World of a Renaissance Jew: The Life and Thought of Abraham ben Mordecai Farissol*, Cincinnati 1981, 134-136. Shortly afterwards, in his book *Massoret ha-Massoret* (The Tradition of Tradition) Elijah Levita held that the country of Prester John was Ethiopia: see H. M. ORLINSKY (ed.), *The Library of Biblical Studies*, New York 1968, 130-131.

<sup>21</sup> See *The Travels of the Infante Dom Pedro of Portugal*, Cambridge, Mass., 1961; *Iddio ci dia buon viaggio e guadagno. Firenze, Biblioteca Riccardiana, ms. 1910 (Codice Vaglianti)*, a cura di L. Formisano, Florence 2004.

<sup>22</sup> Bibliography on Alemanno can be found in Y. ALEMANNO, *Hay ba-'olamim (L'Immortale). Parte I: la Retorica*, ed. by F. Lelli, Florence 1995; F. LELLI, *Alemanno, Yohanan ben Isaac*, in *Encyclopedia of the Renaissance*, P. F. Grendler (ed.), I, New York 1999, 40-42.

<sup>23</sup> See M. BEIT-ARIEH and M. IDEL, "An Eschatological and Astrological Treatise by Abraham Zacut", *Kiryat Sefer*, 54 (1979), pp. 174-194, esp. 191-194.

<sup>24</sup> Ms. Oxford, Bodleian Library, Reggio 23 (= A. Neubauer, *Catalogue of the Hebrew Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library*, Oxford 1886, n. 2234).

which he had received information in an ample series of contemporary texts, mainly letters.

One of the reasons, starting from 1490, why Alemanno decided to assemble documents related to contemporary messianic events, was that of a long-established tradition that held that the Messiah would come in that same year. On the basis of a passage drawn from the fourteenth-century Byzantine *Sefer ha-Qanab* (*The Book of the Measure Unit*, also known as *Sefer ha-Peliab*, *The Book of the Wonder*<sup>25</sup>) in Alemanno's *Liqqutim*<sup>26</sup> we read in fact that messianic advent will occur in 1490. The author concisely explains his hope in a marginal note, which resumes the longer passage quoted on the same folio: "All this is based on what has been said, that the *Sefirot* will rule 500 years each; thus all of them will rule five thousand years. And in the sixth millennium, *Keter* [Crown, the first *Sefirah*] will re-establish her dominion, which will last for half of the period, i.e. 250 years: therefore in the year 5250 [= 1490] redemption will come".

The messianic aspirations which spread among the Italian Jewish communities at the turn of the sixteenth century induced many Italian Jews to settle in the land of Israel and there await the arrival of the Messiah.<sup>27</sup> From this point of view all information with respect to the Near East, based on reality or imagination, could be gathered, circulated, and put into use.

Therefore, starting from around 1490, Alemanno copied many texts on messianic advent on folios 39v-42v of his *Liqqutim*. As far as I know, unlike most of the notes in *Liqqutim*, these were not used

<sup>25</sup> See M. IDEL, *La Cabbalà in Italia (1280-1510)*, Florence 2007, 357.

<sup>26</sup> *Liqqutim*, Ms. Oxford, Bodleian Library, Neubauer 2234, f. 136r.

<sup>27</sup> D. B. RUDERMAN, "Hope against Hope: Jewish and Christian Messianic Expectations in the Late Middle Ages", in *Idem* (ed.), *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture*, 299-323. F. LELLI, "Gerusalemme nella produzione letteraria ebraica e cristiana di età savonaroliana", *Vivens Homo* 9/2 (1998), 331-349; *Idem*, "Gerusalemme e Terra Santa: messianismo e luoghi sacri nell'immaginario ebraico agli inizi dell'età moderna", *Bollettino dell'Amicizia Ebraico-Cristiana*, n.s., 36 (2000), 30-42.

in other works by the author. Perhaps Alemanno was not able to utilize them.<sup>28</sup> Or perhaps, given their content – narrative production, far from philosophical, scientific and purely mystical content – they were unable to find a place among his erudite works.

The texts about messianic expectations and geographical discoveries transcribed by Alemanno in his *Liqqutim* can be distinguished into two different sources: 1) traditional accounts, that is, documents produced by travellers from the past which dealt with the lost tribes and their location; 2) accounts of contemporaries of Alemanno who informed either in correspondence or directly their Italian counterparts of what they saw or of what was told to them in the East, and mainly in the land of Israel.

Among the traditional accounts are: a translation of a fragment from the *Antiquitates Judaicae* by Josephus Flavius; a fragment of the *Sefer Yosippon* (ca. tenth century); longer selections from the tenth century travelogue of Eldad the Danite, from the twelfth century travelogue of Benjamin of Tudela, and from the Hebrew version of the *Tractato de le più meravigliose cose che si trovano in le parte del mondo*, an Italian translation of the fourteenth-century *Voyages* by John Mandeville. Alemanno even quotes the "*Le meravigliose cose del mondo* of Marco Polo".<sup>29</sup> All the selected texts deal with the question of the descendants of the lost tribes in India and Ethiopia.

Among the second type of accounts there is the quotation from a letter sent from Jerusalem to Alemanno's brother by the famous Italian Rabbi Ovadiah of Bertinoro (born in Italy and settled in Jerusalem in 1488), dated 1489/90; a letter from Jerusalem by Abraham of Siena, a disciple of Bertinoro (dated 1496); a letter of Moshe ben Abba Mori (dated 1503) and other information, which

---

<sup>28</sup> These seem to be the two last texts ever written by Alemanno before his death.

<sup>29</sup> On the diffusion of travelogues in Italian within the private libraries of Northern Italian Jews, see D. RAINES, "Judaism in the Eyes of the Venetian Patriariate in the Time of Leon Modena", in D. Malkiel (ed.), *The Lion Shall Roar: Leon Modena and His World*, Jerusalem 2003, 19-54, esp. 39-40 (Hebrew).

Alemanno possibly received from direct conversations with interlocutors whom he may have met in Florence or in other Italian centres. The "direct" accounts gathered by Alemanno regarding the lost tribes extend from 1489/90 (the date of Ovadiah's *Letter*) until 1503/04, the date of the "good news" reported by Portuguese sailors as to the existence of Jewish tribes in India and Ethiopia.

Let us examine in closer detail the texts quoted by Alemanno, which in some way are linked to Portugal.<sup>30</sup> In the margins of folios 39v-40rv-41r of the manuscript of the *Liqqutim*, there are transcriptions of documents which deal with the communication with Portuguese sailors and the religious cults practiced by African populations. The "good news", dated 1503/04, follows on f. 41rv:

[margin f. 39v]

After the equator, towards the south, there are two great nations, many cities and innumerable Kings. There is a people, numerous as the sand on the shores of the sea, which inhabits a territory that extends itself from the West roughly until the land of Canaan. It is called Guinea. The Portuguese who circumnavigated [Africa] in the ocean have visited it frequently with their ships. I spoke with some of the men who have been there for five or seven years and even had wives and children there. They have priests. They said that those men are quiet and peaceful, because they lack of nothing, given that they have much food and their bread comes from the earth because it is a root produced by a plant like the turnip, which can be eaten uncooked, boiled or grilled, according to one's preference and can be found during Summer and Winter all year long; it grows without the need to be planted and practically without the need to cultivate the earth (if not for a few days); their fruits are good and sweet and the grape of their grapevines is always on the tree: a branch or a grape can be cut and in three days the earth will produce another. They do not need clothing and walk around barefoot and naked, as they feel best, feeling no shame. They live without [need for] money and buy nothing, because they are generous and hospitable towards strangers with

---

<sup>30</sup> The complete texts of this section from Alemanno's *Liqqutim* will be available in an edition which I am currently preparing.

whom they eat and drink. They arrive at the age of a hundred and one hundred and fifty years old and those who are a hundred years old seem to be twenty. They produce images of their gods in the form of men and women: the male population worships the male god who is called Forbado, while the women worship the female divinity which is called Piasa;<sup>31</sup> they sacrifice beasts and birds to them, spilling their blood on themselves, eating their sacrificial offerings and speak with their gods face to face. Every man takes his wife by the hand and offers sacrifices, through the use of incense, and speaks with the god. When they visit the priest, all the members of the clergy immerse in frozen water up to their waists (?) to their necks and forget who they are until they are taught that, after they have come out, speaking and reminding them what they forgot and many similar things. There is an island close by, under the equator, which is called Green Island, because the Lord ordered there the blessing that the grass of the earth be green forever, and in that region there is an abundance of lead, gold, precious stones and pearls [the text continues on the margins of f. 40r] which resemble gold and of several colours and which are worth a thousand or two thousand ducats. They do not employ anyone for commerce and buy and trade everything with gold on the seashore, where they deal with every kind of spice and deal, of all the traders in the world, only with the Portuguese [*portogalisti* <sup>32</sup>].

The passage in question may be based on the news transmitted through the missions sent by King John II in 1487 to look for Prester John from the Western African coast (Guinea), through the African continent. The Portuguese documents regarding those missions are scanty. The Portuguese seem to have reached Timbuctu and other courts of inland nations, such as the Oni of Ife, who are perhaps alluded to in the passage in Alemanno's text. The "green island" should be a reference to the Archipelago of Cape Verde.<sup>33</sup> An interesting parallel source to Alemanno's Hebrew passage can be

---

<sup>31</sup> Proper names are written by Alemanno with vowel points.

<sup>32</sup> I decided to enclose between square brackets the various names used by Alemanno's sources to designate the inhabitants of Portugal. All of the occurrences betray different uses current in contemporary Italian dialects, and particularly in Tuscan. The spelling of names of cities quoted by Alemanno also varies.

<sup>33</sup> See CH.D. LEY (ed.), *Portuguese Voyages, 1498-1663*, London and New York 1947.

found in the letters sent to Lorenzo di Pier Francesco Medici by Amerigo Vespucci in June 1501. Vespucci reports from Lisbon to his "Magnifico Padrone" about his own 1499 voyage with the Portuguese around Africa. He gives several details on the commercial links between Florence and Lisbon, where a thriving Florentine colony had settled to trade in the fifteenth century.<sup>34</sup> After reminding his addressee that he had been invited by the King of Portugal himself to take part in the maritime expedition, Vespucci introduces his narration by a concise description of what he is going to expound later on in his letter.<sup>35</sup>

Vespucci states at the beginning of his letter that he is sure that other Florentine traders active in Lisbon had certainly informed Lorenzo di Pier Francesco Medici of his own activities. This mention allows us to understand that at the turn of the sixteenth cen-

---

<sup>34</sup> See J. CORTESÃO, "Lisboa e Florença. A expedição de Pedro Álvares Cabral e a família dos Marchioni", *Seara nova*, 8 (1922), 208-214; V. RAU, "Un Florentin au service de l'expansion portugaise, Francesco Corbinelli", in *Fatti e idee di storia economica nei secoli XII-XX. Studi dedicati a Franco Borlandi*, Bologna 1977, 77-286; M. SPALLANZANI, "Fiorentini e portoghesi in Asia all'inizio del Cinquecento attraverso le fonti archivistiche fiorentine", in *Aspetti della vita economica medievale. Atti del Convegno di studi nel X anniversario della morte di Federigo Melis*, Firenze 1984, 321-332. I am grateful for these bibliographic references to Prof. Claude Huet of the University of California, Los Angeles.

<sup>35</sup> The following version of the passage from Vespucci's letter is based on the Italian text edited by L. Formisano in *Iddio ci dia buon viaggio e guadagno*, 117. My heartiest thanks to Prof. Formisano for showing me this reference and for sharing with me his wide knowledge on the literary sources related to the Portuguese expeditions known in Florence at the turn of the sixteenth century:

"[from Lisbon] we travelled for half a day, and as we sailed we passed in sight of the Fortunate Isles, now called the Canaries, changing direction along the coast of Africa. As we sailed we approached a cape, called Cape Verde, the true beginning of the province of Ethiopia, south of the Fortunates [...] where we happened across two ships of the Portuguese Crown, returning from the East Indies, out of the same 13 ships that sailed for Calicut some 14 months ago, with which I had long discussions not so much about their voyage, but more about the coast of the land they ran along, the riches they found there and those they brought back. We shall briefly relate here to Your Magnificence: not about their cosmography, since there was no one dealing with this or with mathematics (a great mistake), but plainly, as they related to me, so I may be able to bring corrections to Ptolemy's *Cosmography*."

tury many descriptions of the Portuguese discoveries were available in Florence; Alemanno could have drawn the material for his notes from some of those letters, which he may have known directly or indirectly through his Florentine colleagues and friends.<sup>36</sup>

Alemanno's passage, continuing on f. 41r of his *Liqqutim*, later reports the "good news" associated with the Portuguese discovery of Jewish tribes in India:

[margin f. 41r]

Good news from a far away land on the people of Israel which is incomplete<sup>37</sup> (264<sup>th</sup> year of the sixth millennium [=1503-04])

It has been some years that the Portuguese entered the ocean from the West and found many islands and completed their voyage [around Africa] towards the South and have travelled for many years along this sea, discovering a great people close to the sea, called "men of Guinea [*Kinea*]", of whom we spoke above.<sup>38</sup> In those same years they arrived even further<sup>39</sup> and discovered a place through which the ocean enters in the Southern continent creating a great sea called the Indian Ocean, of which we spoke above. From that a smaller sea is formed and at the end of it the "tongue" of the great sea which is called the "Red Sea"<sup>40</sup> is to be found, which is the sea which was crossed by the people of Israel;<sup>41</sup> passing from the Indian Ocean, [the Portuguese] have discovered great places belonging to the Muslims, one of which is the great city called Caligutim,<sup>42</sup> whose sovereign is very important.

<sup>36</sup> On Alemanno's stay in Florence see M. LUZZATI, "Documenti inediti su Yohanan Alemanno a Firenze (1481 e 1492-1494)", in D. LISCIA BEMPORAD and I. ZATELLI (eds.), *La cultura ebraica all'epoca di Lorenzo il Magnifico*, Florence 1998, 71-84; F. Lelli, "Umanesimo laurenziano nell'opera di Yohanan Alemanno", *ibidem*, 49-67. We do not have evidence that Alemanno resided in Florence after 1494, though he might have lived in other Tuscan cities.

<sup>37</sup> Only the return of all the tribes of Israel to the Holy Land will make the people of Israel "complete" thus fostering messianic advent.

<sup>38</sup> See Alemanno's previously quoted passage (fs. 39v-40r).

<sup>39</sup> This information can be referred to Bartolomeu Dias' mission to the Southern extremity of Africa (1487-1488).

<sup>40</sup> The Red Sea in Hebrew is literally "Reed Sea"; here there is a pun based on the identical writing and pronunciation of the Hebrew words for "end" and "reed" ["*snp*"].

<sup>41</sup> The author obviously refers to the crossing of the Red Sea described in the book of *Exodus*.

<sup>42</sup> Today called Kozhikode.

Close to it is another kingdom which is called Coghin<sup>43</sup> and some Portuguese Jews who have been there have already written about it. Close to Coghin there is a region which is 15 days wide [by foot], which is inhabited by Jews and where the ruling King is called Joseph<sup>44</sup> and the capital is called Shingli<sup>45</sup> and the kingdom is designated with the same name. They are dark and white like Indians<sup>46</sup> and are dressed [...] and in the bottom. They are sons [... free from] any kind of tribute, of the tribe of Judah and Benjamin, who left before the first diaspora of Nabucodonosor and who subsequently did not return in the Second Temple period. All the pepper comes from this country. The Jews gather it and sell it mainly to Coghin and in a lesser degree to the four great Muslim merchants who live there and pay a tax to the King because no one else can acquire from the Jews except those from Coghin. The merchants sell it in turn to the Portuguese [*Portogalisim*]. All these things have been told by one of these Portuguese [*Portogalim*] mentioned in the presence of Hayyim Franco, who related them to two Rabbis who arrived by ship to speak with him. [f. 41v] The two Rabbis, on account of their chaste dress,

---

<sup>43</sup> Present Cochin.

<sup>44</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cochin\\_Jews](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cochin_Jews): "An old, but not particularly reliable, tradition says that Jews of Cochin came in mass to Cranganore (an ancient port, near Cochin) after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. A chieftain by the name of Joseph Rabban, according to local tradition, was granted a principality over the Jews of Cochin by the Chera Emperor of Kerala, Bhaskara Ravivarman II. His descendants had, in effect, their own principality (called Anjuvannam in Indian sources) for many centuries until a chieftainship dispute broke out between two brothers (one of them named Joseph Azar) in the 15th century. The dispute led neighboring princes to dispossess them. In 1524, the Muslims, backed by the ruler of Calicut (today called Kozhikode), attacked the Jews of Cranganore on the pretext that they were tampering with the pepper trade. Most Jews fled to Cochin and went under the protection of the Hindu Raja there".

<sup>45</sup> Shinkali, nowadays Cranganore. From 1565 Jews left Shinkali for Cochin, where they have been living until a few years ago, when they mostly migrated to Israel after the establishment of the modern State. See W. J. FISCHER, "Cochin in Jewish History", *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, 30 (1962), 37-59; I. BEN-ZVI, *The Scattered People of Israel*, Jerusalem 1967, 294-295 (in Hebrew). On Jews and Portuguese New Christians in Cochin see the fundamental study by JOSÉ ALBERTO RODRIGUES DA SILVA TAVIM, *Judeus e Cristãos-Novos de Cochim. História e memória (1500-1662)*, Edições APPACDM Distrital de Braga, 2003.

<sup>46</sup> This could be a reference to the "Black Jews", being the alleged descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel who had sought refuge in India around the seventh century B.C.E., and the "White Jews", being European Jews who had migrated in Kerala region from the fifteenth century C.E.

donned white tunics over their clothes like the Muslims, and under the tunics one of them donned a beautiful *tallit qatan*, while the other maintained it always on his head, as is the custom of the French, its sides hanging over the two sides of his head. They were accompanied by a nobleman, one of the Jewish ministers of King Joseph,<sup>47</sup> who had been invited to speak with the four Muslim merchants who buy pepper. He told the commander of the ship that he wished to stipulate an accord in favour of Hayyim [Franco] aforementioned, so as to return 10 thousand ducats to him and that he should speak with King Joseph, but the mentioned Hayyim did not want to speak about the subject because he feared in his heart what could happen to them and did not speak openly for fear of the commander of the ship. They lack grain in all their reign, but they only grow rice; they do what they can to buy grain to prepare the *matzah* [the unleavened bread for Pesah]. They barely have wine while they have many kinds of fruit which we do not know.

The compared reading of both passages contained on folios 39v-40r and 41r allows us to hearken back to the information on Portuguese expeditions contained in the letters sent to Italy by the Florentine merchants from Lisbon<sup>48</sup> or to the accounts provided by the Portuguese missions of John II. The King intended to find a quick passage to India. Hence, as well as the expeditions by land directed towards the land of Prester John, of which we already spoke, he also supported a second expedition, in the same year of 1487, guided by Pero da Covilhã and Afonso Paiva, which had Aden as its destination through the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, in search of Prester John in Ethiopia and in India. Pero and Afonso were provided with a map which had been derived from the map of the world compiled by Diego Ortiz de Vilhegas (Calcadilha, Bishop of Viseu), by Rodrigo de Piedras Negras, and by a Jew named Moses. The two explorers sailed from Santarém via Barcelona to Naples where their

---

<sup>47</sup> See above what has been said on the Messiah son of Yosef.

<sup>48</sup> See, for instance, the important information on Calicut, Cochin and other Indian territories reached by the Portuguese, in the letters sent by Bartolomeo Marchionni, Amerigo Vespucci, and other Florentine merchants from Lisbon: FORMISANO, *Iddio ci dia buon viaggio e guadagno, passim*.

bills of exchange were paid by the sons of Cosimo de' Medici. At this time Alemanno probably was already in Florence, where he taught the children of the wealthy banker Yehiel of Pisa, who was in close contact with the Medici, with Naples and the Iberian Peninsula. It is probable, thus, that the Florentine merchants of the Da Pisa circle heard about Pero da Covilhã's feats in Naples. Paiva died before fulfilling the King's orders, whereas Covilhã took ship to India and travelled the Malabar coast from Goa to Calicut. In 1490 he returned to Alexandria and sent a report to the King from Cairo lauding Calicut as a crucial port for the spice trade and providing information on the sailing routes from East Africa to India.<sup>49</sup> The information about the achievements of Covilhã's mission were brought back to Lisbon by two Portuguese Jews who had been sent by the King to meet Covilhã in Cairo: Rabbi Abraham of Beja and Joseph of Lamego, who reported to the King about the African and Indian journeys of the Portuguese explorer and about his observations on the cinnamon, pepper and clove trade in Calicut.<sup>50</sup>

The information from the document quoted by Alemanno is linked to the Medieval tradition of the lost tribes, but also leads to a commercial description by contemporaries similar to those contained in the lost letters of Abraham of Beja and Joseph of Lamego and the news of the Portuguese circumnavigations of Africa. The Jewish name quoted in the document, Hayyim Franco, is most certainly of Sephardic origin. Unfortunately, we have no information about this merchant.

Further details on Indian Jews are provided by the following excerpt of a letter copied by Alemanno from a document by an otherwise unknown Moses ben Abba Mori:

---

<sup>49</sup> See KAYSERLING, *Historia dos Judeus em Portugal*, 76-77; J.M. Boyed, "Exploration", in P. F. GRENDLER (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Renaissance*, II, 306-315, esp. 309.

<sup>50</sup> Analogous information we find in Alemanno's notes. On Covilhã's exploration, see F. ALVAREZ, "Chapter CIV: How Pero de Covilham, a Portuguese, is in the country of the Prester, and how came here, and why he was sent", in *The Prester John of the Indies*, Cambridge 1961, 369-376.

[margin f. 41v]

[Moses ben Abba Mori,] of blessed memory, has written: "In the five thousandth year 263 [1502/03] the inhabitants of Shingli wrote: 'Before the destruction of the [Ist] Temple, in the period of Jeroboam, son of Nebat, nine tribes and a half left and established themselves in Kush [= Ethiopia], where they still live. We, the inhabitants of Shingli, are of the tribe of Judah and Benjamin. After the destruction of the Second Temple, the honour of our master Samuel ha-Levi went to the Israelites and priests in the land of Malabar and founded the city where we live, Shingli. At this time all the land of Malabar, as the land of Coliquit and Keshi were subject to a sole pagan King. Samuel ha-Levi asked him for a place to build a synagogue. What did the King do? He gave a city to every King. To King Samri he gave the city of Caliquit and to Rabbi Samuel he gave Shingli. To King Bevili he gave Keshi. We are allies of the King of Keshi and he is our ally, but the same cannot be said of the King of Coliquito. Our prince is Rabbi Joseph, son of Rabbi Sa'adya the prince, and we receive the taxes from the Muslims, from non Jews and all the other nations in the world; here we have an autonomous monarchy. [Because of this] they cannot do any harm and we can combat Muslims, killing many in great conflicts. Many of their ships are prepared to combat against us but a miracle occurred which struck them down. We have faith in the 613 precepts. We have the Pentateuch, the eight Prophets, the *Tanbuma* and the commentary of the Frenchman Rashi above all others, but we do not have the texts of the sixty treatises [of the Babylonian *Talmud*] except very few, while of Maimonides we have everything; we have the *Mishnayot* of Judah ha-Nasi, the *Midrash* for *Yom Kippur*, the *Beresbit Rabbah*, the book of Eldad the Danite and the *Sefer Miklol* [by David Qimhi]. We also have the use, during the second festive day of *Shemini `Atzeret*, after having recited the additional prayer, to bring eight *Sifre Torah* in beautiful cases with chains and decorations (*rimmonim*) of gold outside of the synagogue and to proclaim in a loud voice chants of thanksgiving, walking and reciting the prayer of the *Minbah*. And for *Purim*, after the prayer, we read the *Megillab*, we drink, we rejoice, we get drunk and we rest. Then we create a doll in the form of a man and we take it into the street, we burn it and throw stones against it, all the people of Israel along with the nations of the world, Muslims and Christians. We are all greatly embarrassed by this matter. Written on Sunday 25th of Shevat of the year 5263. Moshe ben Rab Abba Mori. Keep well.

In this fragment dated 1503 (but evidently copied by Alemanno in a later period, when Moses was already dead, as it is evident from

the initial formula "of blessed memory"), Jewish inhabitants of Shingli are mentioned again, perhaps on the basis of accounts by Jewish travellers in India; an analogous subject is dealt with in the fragment of Abraham of Siena's letter, dated 1496, transcribed in the margin of the same f. 41v, immediately after the preceding one:<sup>51</sup>

From a letter sent from Jerusalem by Abraham of Siena in 1496 we have come to know of five Jewish Kings who live in impenetrable mountains in front of the land of Kush [= Ethiopia], who attack the Muslims travelling to Mecca. Some people say that they are called "sons of Moses". They are courageous [and are able to] steal a camel at the same time as its rider and take it to the summit of the mountains. The author of the letter writes, in addition, that he heard about a sage worthy of belief in the lands of the Orient, who said that in the middle of the sea there is an island called Shingli, in which there are around forty thousand Jewish families, extraordinarily wealthy, schooled in the written and oral Torah, governed by a Jewish King. This island is located in front of the Kings of India and in front of this there is a grandiose kingdom which is called Galicut and is inhabited by a people which worship fire and the sun. It is not easy to reach the island because the sea which has to be traversed to reach it is dangerous and thus it can only be reached by small boats and ships. On account of their position the Kings of India have not been able to conquer it. Our master Ovadiah [of Bertinoro] has spoken with some Jews who have been there, who mentioned the spices which come from that island and that the King who governs it is called Rabbi Joshua.<sup>52</sup>

This text<sup>53</sup> could derive as well from the tradition of the Portuguese geographical discoveries, in particular to the double expe-

---

<sup>51</sup> This document was published by A. DAVID, *Reflections on Jewish Jerusalem. An anthology of Hebrew Letters from the Mamluk Age*, Tel Aviv 2003, 139-141.

<sup>52</sup> The last part of the letter is not relevant for our analysis and is not translated here: "They also told him that in all territories of Assyria there are very many Jews, who are very wealthy, and that there are approximately two hundred communities in Media and Persia, though no rabbi can be found among them. They furthermore said that in all the territories of Media and Persia there are about nine hundred Jewish communities (some of them count eight hundred families, some six hundred, some three hundred, and they are not aware of the meaning of "diaspora" and every one does according to his will (end of quote)".

<sup>53</sup> The letter was published in Italian version by Ariel Toaff, *Il messia nero*, 53.

dition to Ethiopia and India in search of Prester John, a subject which was central to many letters sent from Lisbon to Florence at the turn of the sixteenth century.<sup>54</sup>

The following marginal note, derived from another unknown source, is important to understand the geographical perception of India and Ethiopia at the time of Alemanno: both regions could be designated with the same term "India". Alemanno deals with this issue because he is interested in revealing his information about Prester John:

[*margin f. 40v*]

[...] as the Indians refer, in the three regions of India two are to the west and north of the Indian Ocean and one is to the south, close to the place where the Nile begins: there Prester John is based, who reigns over all and three Indian regions and who has in his power more than 44 Kings, considering only those until the Northeastern and Southwestern borders. He boasts of being a Jew from a lost tribe who went to meet exiles in those lands and to come from the royal seed of Judah. To this day they are circumcised, because they say that the Christian is the Jewish one and he who is Christian must of necessity be circumcised. This old man, who is still living, is called Costante, he is 220 years old and is still very strong. At the time of Pope Sixtus<sup>55</sup> he sent letters in which he wanted to debate with him regarding circumcision and to have a house built in Rome for Indians and one built in India for the Romans.<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> Formisano, *Iddio ci dia buon viaggio e guadagno, passim*.

<sup>55</sup> An evident hint at Pope Sixtus IV (who reigned from 1471 to 1484), who restored the Church of Saint Stephen in the Vatican renaming it Saint Stephen of the Abyssinians in 1479. See also next note and below.

<sup>56</sup> The author of the Hebrew text refers to Emperor Constantine II (1471-1494) of Ethiopia, known also as Eskender (Alexander). However, he died at a young age: it is possible that Constantine II was confused with his grand-father Zara Yakob or Constantine I (1399-1468), who had sent a diplomatic mission, led by the Sicilian Pietro Rombulo, to Pope Nicholas V in 1450 (see T. TAMRAT, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, Oxford 1972, 264-265). It is worth observing that the Portuguese expedition led by Covilhã reached Ethiopia during Constantine II's reign.

The text of this note certainly dates to earlier than 1494, the year of Constantine II's death, though Alemanno could have copied or translated it later. Be this as it may, Alemanno seems to be the first to deal in Hebrew with Prester John and the identification of this legendary figure with the Ethiopian *negus*. Ullendorff<sup>57</sup> observes in fact that all Hebrew documents pertaining to Prester John would have been written later than 1519, the year of the publication in Constantinople of the first Hebrew version of the *Letters* of Prester John.<sup>58</sup>

However, a fragment kept at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, once belonging to the Elkan Nathan Adler collection,<sup>59</sup> contains a text which corresponds to lines 116-152 of the printed text of the *Letters*. This short fragment of the Hebrew document is accompanied by a sort of introduction which appears on the right margin of the folio and by some passages translated into Latin on the left margin. The Hebrew text of the note deals with "the kingdom of Prester John and with the Jews who do not live far from him", stating that they descend from the Jews deported by Nabucodonosor from Jerusalem. In the right margin a note explains that Prester John dwells North of Calicut "in the mainland, far from the ocean". Then the anonymous hand adds: "That those Jews who live there dwell near Prester John is well known to everybody, as all of us have heard from the oral testimonies of the black priests who have come and are still coming and clearly relate about the existence of many Jews who live with them. I am referring to the priests who presently live in Rome and form a sort of sect constituted by thirty members who meet in a new church which was built on purpose to host them. All this I personally heard from some sages who stayed in Calicut for two days and related those words on two different

---

<sup>57</sup> ULLENDORFF - BECKINGHAM, *The Hebrew Letters of Prester John*, 31-34.

<sup>58</sup> The edition is not dated, and scholars still question about its actual year of publication.

<sup>59</sup> ULLENDORFF - BECKINGHAM, *The Hebrew Letters of Prester John*, 31.

occasions in front of the duke Ercole here in Ferrara, both the story of Calicut and that of Lamik, as well as the stories of the Prester John and of many Jews who live there and their deeds etc."<sup>60</sup>

If the mention of the "black priests" should be understood as a reference to the Ethiopians who were received in Rome at the time of Sixtus IV, the episode of the sages who travelled to India and related their adventures to the Duke of Ferrara also allows us to draw some relevant historical conclusions. Ullendorff<sup>61</sup> maintains that this duke should be Ercole II, who ruled from 1508 to 1559, but we could also think of Ercole I (1470-1505). Since Alemanno had contacts with the court of the Este,<sup>62</sup> we could also imagine that some of the meetings described in his marginal notes could have taken place in the setting of Ferrara.<sup>63</sup>

The Italian concern with Portuguese geographical discoveries and their association with messianism at the end of the fifteenth century – among both Jews and Christians – was certainly responsible for the numerous phenomena of messianic expectation that took place in Italy in the first half of the sixteenth century. Alemanno's research on this issue, although still founded on Medieval traditions, belies the characteristic humanist interest that pushed the author to seek original information on topics of his time that were largely debated. The short notes on the reappearance of the lost tribes in distant countries, contained in Alemanno's *Liqqitim*, can thus be counted among the very first testimonies gathered by a Renaissance Jewish intellectual on the documented existence, on the basis of the information derived from contemporary Portuguese explorations, of Jews in India and Ethiopia.

---

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*, 33.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>62</sup> Alemanno seems to have resided in Ferrara after 1494. See ALEMANNO, *Hay ha-'olamim (L'Immortale)*, p. 10 and notes 41 and 42.

<sup>63</sup> See above, note 20.