

ELIA CAPSALI

(b. ca. 1485-90 – d. > 1550)

LIFE

Although the exact dates of his birth and death cannot be established, E.C. was born in Candia probably around 1485-90 and died there after 1550. A well-known Cretan family, the Capsalis had served as constables (*condestabile*) and chiefs of the Jewish community on several occasions and distinguished themselves in the study of the *Torah* and *Talmud*. E.C. provides a detailed though at times legendary and historically unreliable account of his great uncle Moses Capsali's (d. 1500) life under the rule of Mehmed II (1444-46 and 1451-81). Moses Capsali was the chief rabbi in Constantinople. His nephew Elkana Capsali (d. > 1523), E.C.'s father, had studied in Padua.¹ After his studies Elkana Capsali returned to Candia and married Pothula Capsali (d. > 1523). During the years of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain (1492) he helped many Jewish refugees settle in Candia as the constable of the Jewish community there. Besides E.C., he had two other sons: His firstborn, David (d. ca. 1533), whose signature accompanies that of E.C. in several documents, traveled to Constantinople and may have been among the 17 who wrote the statute of the Candia community in 1574.

Most of E.C.'s biographical information concerns his education, his trip to Italy and his role as a rabbi. E.C. received his initial education from his father, who was also a kabbalist. He then went to Ashkenazi yeshivas in accordance with the family tradition.² He studied under the guidance of famous Ashkenazi rabbis both in Crete and in Italy. A key event in E.C.'s life was his trip to Venice which he describes in his *Dibre ha-Yamim*. On 11 November 1508 E.C. set out for Italy on a pilgrims' boat from Crete for Venice and arrived there after an eight-day journey. E.C. went to Padua and studied at the yeshiva of Yehuda Minz (d. 1508) and met his tutor Rabbi Iserlen (d. ?) who taught him throughout his time in Italy.³ Due to the war fought between Venice and the Alliance (League of Cambrai, 1504), E.C. fled to Venice on May 24 1509. In Venice, E.C. studied at the yeshiva of Rabbi Israel Ashkenazi (d. ?), Meir Katznellebogen (d. 1565), and Menahem Delmedigo (16th century), E.C.'s uncle. On 24 January 1510, after 18 months, he was compelled to return to Candia because of the war.⁴

Once back in Candia, E.C. continued his studies with Rabbi Isaac de Ingelheim (d. ?). After his return to Crete in 1518 E.C. married the youngest daughter of Judah Habib (d. 15th century). In the same year he became a rabbi. He was constable from 1515 to 1519, from 1526 to 1529 and from 1538 to 1541. In the Venetian documents he is called Rebbi and *dottor condestabile*. E.C. was very skilful in handling the relationship between the community and the Venetian authorities. On 25th of June 1541, while E.C. was constable of the Jewish community, a mob rose against the

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Jews because the Greeks thought they were spies of the Turks.⁵ Thanks to E.C.'s intervention, the Jews managed to escape from danger and to celebrate this escape E.C. instituted what is called the 'Purim of Candia.'⁶ From the Venetian documents which describe E.C. as a faithful servant of the Republic we know that he was elected more than once to tax the Jews and was responsible for the census of the community.⁷ Besides his Ashkenazi heritage E.C. also belonged to the world of the Romaniote Jews. He knew Greek and Italian.

E.C.'s connection with the Ottoman world is multidimensional. In addition to his aforementioned family connections, his interest in Ottoman history derived from his status as a subject of Venice. Crete was the last Venetian colony to fall to the Ottomans following a long struggle due to its strategic position. As the refuge of the first exiles from Constantinople in the aftermath of the Ottoman conquest, Crete was also the place from where the news on the Ottomans spread to Italy and to Western Europe. In *Seder Elijahu Zuta*, E.C. reflects not only some of the views of his contemporaries on the fall of Constantinople in 1453 but also his unique opinions on the topic.

The reigns of Mehmed II, Selim I (1512-20), and Süleymān I (1520-66) constitute E.C.'s primary focus due to the role of these three sultans as the conquerors of Constantinople (1453), Syria and Egypt (1517), and Rhodes (1522), respectively. E.C. emphasizes the great political and religious significance of these three events. While the fall of Constantinople signaled the defeat of the Christian nations as well as the settling of the Jews exiled from the Iberian Peninsula into the new capital of the Ottoman Empire, the conquest of Syria and Egypt consolidated the expansion of Ottoman power as far as Palestine, and the capture of Rhodes represented the fall of an ancient Christian power that had always resisted the Ottoman attacks and had asked in vain for help from the other Christian nations. Refugees from Rhodes reached Crete, and it is from Rhodes that the plague that afflicted Crete in 1523 spread. Writing a few months after the events, E.C.'s description of the conquest of Rhodes is particularly interesting as he witnessed the arrival of the knights and other refugees. According to E.C., the extraordinary religious significance of these historical events was due to their messianic nature in that the Ottoman conquests and the defeat of the Christian nations anticipated the coming of the Messiah.

WORKS

① *Dibreya ha-Yamim le Malkhut Venezia*

Written in 1517, *Dibreya ha-Yamim le Malkhut Venezia* (*Chronicle of the Kingdom of Venice*) is the fruit of E.C.'s curiosity and enthusiasm awakened by his trip to Italy. Impressed by the coexistence of the world of the Jewish religious academies and that of Italian Jewry in general, E.C. remarks in the Introduction to his *Chronicle* that he intends to describe two main subjects: the greatness of the kingdom of Venice with its magnificent ceremonies, and traditions, and the "splendid" life of the Ashkenazi Jews

and their flourishing culture. While describing Jewish life in Northern Italy and in particular in the Veneto, E.C. leaves a detailed account of the organization of the yeshiva of Yehuda Minz in Padua, of his death, and the election of Abraham Minz.

Particularly interested in the foreign policy and military campaigns of Venice, E.C. investigates the political decisions as well as the determining factors which shaped the socio-political order, and tries to analyze the causes of the war in which Venice was engaged. With his sometimes naïve analysis and understanding of the political world, E.C. stresses the dominant role of the logic of supremacy and power determining political developments.

② *Seder Elijahu Zuta*

With its title of Talmudic origin (Ketubot 106) meaning *The Little Order of Elia* written during the course of the plague that broke out in Crete in 1523, *Seder Elijahu Zuta* shows a more mature conception of history and of the role of the Jews in it.⁸ In this relatively longer and less descriptive work, E.C. intervenes several times to explain his aims and his conception of history, and employs different techniques to deliver his message. Paying greater attention to the sources and their use, E.C. inserts anecdotes on the everyday life of the Jews under the Ottomans as well as long poetic and rhetorical compositions to comment on the events which he considers most relevant. As such he intends to convey his complex conception of history and not only to describe a power and its historical evolution.

The *Seder* consists of 147 chapters and is divided into four books, the contents of which are summarized in the Introduction of the work. The first book, which begins with the history of the Creation of the world, deals primarily with the reign of Mehmed II and includes a detailed account of the fall of Constantinople. It also focuses on the conquest of the Morea (Peloponnesus) as a result of Mehmed II's two campaigns (1458 and 1460) against the Venetians who supported Thomas Palaiologos (d. 1460) against his brother Demetrios (d. 1460), who asked for help from the Ottomans. In this book E.C. also mistakenly describes an Egyptian campaign undertaken by Mehmed II.⁹

The second book contains an account of the reign of Bāyezīd II (1481-1512), his struggle against his brother Cem until the latter's death in 1495, and the wars against Venice, which started with the campaign of 1499. Bāyezīd II conquered Lepanto, Modon and Coron from Venice (1499) and consolidated the conquests of his father Mehmed II by modernizing the army and the navy. E.C. also relates the accession to the throne of Selīm I (1512-20), who defeated the Mamluks and the Safavids. This book includes an account of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and a general history of the Jewish communities there.¹⁰

The third book is dedicated to the reign of Selīm I, a figure E.C. greatly admires, and Selīm's conquest of Egypt in 1517, while the fourth deals with the reign of Sü-

leymān I (1520-66), the Ottoman conquest of Belgrade in 1521, and the conquest of Rhodes in 1522 from the Knights of Saint John.¹¹

E.C. mentions contributing to the wisdom of his reader through the exemplarity of the stories of the sultans and celebrating God's worldly works and divine justice as his two principal aims for writing *Seder*.¹² Although the main purpose of the work is didactic and historical narrative is utilized to teach religious principles, E.C. does not neglect the goal of entertaining his readers afflicted by the bereavements of the plague.¹³ Referring to a certain classic iconography of the sultans, which portrayed them as mighty warriors and often cruel and powerful rulers, E.C. supplies a hagiographical image of the sultans. He compares both Mehmed II and Selim I to Alexander the Great.¹⁴ He describes Mehmed II, Selim I, and Süleyman I as benefactors of the Jews and inserts several anecdotes demonstrating their benevolence towards the Jewish people and the help they offered to the Jews against their persecutors.¹⁵

Two main keys of interpretation are identifiable in E.C.'s historical work: messianism and rhetoric. E.C. believed that the Ottoman conquests and the defeat of Christianity signified the end of the Exile of the Jews from the Holy Land and their redemption through the coming of a Messiah, a descendant of David. In fact, he formulated a messianic view of history where the sultans perform a messianic role and where there is not only one messianic event like the expulsion of the Jews from Spain but a series of messianic events which starts with the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and ends with the conquest of Syria and Egypt in 1517 and the fall of Rhodes in 1522. E.C. built his narrative around these events, delivering a messianic message through the means of a traditional chronicle of events. His messianic thought is not original and is almost completely derived from Isaac Abravanel (d. 1508).

E.C.'s sources fall into two categories: historical and literary. On more than one occasion he declares to have used oral historical sources. Although he alludes to written secular sources he never quotes non-Jewish written sources and hardly quotes Jewish historical sources.¹⁶ Some of the events he describes are not mentioned in other contemporary chronicles. For instance, E.C.'s description of the Ottoman conquest of Egypt has no parallel in the historical works of Ibn Iyās (d. > 1522) and Ibn-Ṭūlūn (d. 1522).¹⁷ E.C.'s main source on the Ottoman conquest of Egypt is Yitzhaq al-Hakim (d. 1546), who lived in Cairo at the time.¹⁸ Among the 15th century sources on which E.C. relied is the work of Isaac Abravanel, one of the authors he admires and quotes most. In fact, Chapter 40 of *Seder* is copied almost verbatim from Isaac Abravanel's commentary to the second book of Kings, written after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain.¹⁹ Another source which E.C. often quotes is *Sefer ha-Kabbalah*, a historical work written in the 12th century by philosopher Abraham Ibn Daud (d. 1180).²⁰

E.C. reads contemporary events using Biblical episodes to hint to the different levels of history according to his religious, providential conception of history. Most

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of the book is written in a highly rhetorical and poetic style; there are only few parts where the style of the narration is plain and clear. E.C.'s language becomes very precise in describing some matters, like military operations and sieges, and is quite technical when it comes to his description of weapons and fortifications.

E.C.'s *Seder* is a very valuable source for Ottoman history especially regarding events contemporary to the author like the conquest of Egypt and Syria and the fall of Rhodes. E.C.'s Eastern Mediterranean perspective and his Jewish identity make his work unique. At times his historical account is precise and historically faithful but at other times it is legendary and mythical.

E.C. was the author of several *halakhic* works such as *Me'ah she`arim* in which he discusses the importance of the respect and reverence due to one's parents,²¹ and *No'am we-hovlim*,²² an answer to Rabbi David Vital (16th cen.) who wrote the work '*Hatsalat ha-ro`eh mi-yad ha-ze'ev*' against Rabbi Binyamin B. R. Matityah (16th cen.). E.C. also wrote poetic works which are distinguished for their astounding use of rhetorical devices and poetic images and places.²³ His poetic works include '*Ayelet 'ahavim*, *Hevel Havalim*, and a number of compositions on the occasion of important events that affected the lives of the Jews in Candia. He wrote a lamentation over the victims of the plague that broke out in Crete in 1523.²⁴ He wrote about many matters of Jewish law, such as the keeping of the Sabbath, *kashruth*, marriage and engagement customs, relations with non-Jewish people, and many smaller matters concerning the community's everyday life.²⁵ His signature is found in most of the regulations and he himself introduced new regulations and laws. The last statute of the community of Candia, which bears his name, is dated 1549.

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② *Seder Eliyahu Zuta*

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¹ Elia Capsali, *Seder Eliyahu Zuta*, introduction and notes by A. Shmuelevitz, S. Simonsohn, M. Bena-yahu (Tel Aviv University, 1983), 256.

² The Capsalis, like the Del Medigos, although born in Crete, were adherers to the Ashkenazi tradition and received their education in Ashkenazi yeshivas.

³ *Seder*, 253, 256.

⁴ *Seder*, 311.

⁵ Elia Samuel Hartom, Umberto Cassuto, *Taqqanoth Candia* (Jerusalem, 1943), 121-122.

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⁷ See the collection at the Venetian State Archives, *Memoriali del Duca di Candia*, envelope nos. 33, 33 bis, 34, 34 bis and 35, f. 4 and f. 397.

⁸ E.C. wrote *Seder* in the period of his quarantine in Candia from 14 Siwan 5283/28 May 1523 to 25 Elul 5283/5 September 1523.

⁹ *Seder*, vol. 1 pp. 118-121, chapter 31 includes Mehmet's Egyptian campaign.

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¹⁰ *Seder*, vol. 1, chaps. 40-83.

¹¹ *Seder*, vol. 2, chaps. 154-165.

¹² *Seder*, 9.

¹³ *Seder*, vol. 2, 109.

¹⁴ *Seder*, 266, 397.

¹⁵ *Seder*, 81, 83, 85, 131, 275.

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¹⁸ Arieh Shmuelevitz, *ibidem*, 6 and also *Seder*, note 112, p. 11.

¹⁹ *Seder*, 76.

²⁰ *Seder*, 158.

²¹ Elia Capsali, *Me'ah she`arim*, ed. A. Shoshana (Jerusalem, 2001).

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²⁴ *Seder*, 205-211.

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