



Location of the Call in today's Barcelona. ICGC.

## MEDIAEVAL JEWISH TRACES IN TODAY'S CITY

The material remnants of Barcelona's mediaeval *Call* are thin on the ground, in contrast with its rich documentary legacy, conserved in the city's archives. But still today, the names of places and streets evoke its presence in an urban setting that has undergone significant changes over the course of the centuries.

Archaeological digs have also contributed to better knowledge of the *Call*. Utensils, for example earthenware plates and bowls, were the same as those used by the rest of Barcelona's residents, but together with these pieces ceramics have appeared with inscriptions in Hebrew and ritual objects, particularly lamps that are considered to have been related with the Festival of Lights or *Hanukkah*. Other pieces such as luxury oriental ceramics have appeared that are related with Jewish participation in Mediterranean commerce, as well as utensils for different trades: medical instruments, pieces of coral, dices and patterns for making them, etc. Also worthy of note, finally, are the large grain silos located in Carrer Fruita, and the remains of the house of Joseph Bonhiac, where the MUHBA's El *Call* centre is situated today. Outside the physical environment of the *Call*, the Jewish cemetery at Montjuïc has also been the subject of numerous research studies.

The epigraphic remains of the *Call* are found today in different places around the city, as a result of the reuse of stone from houses in the Jewish quarter and from headstones from the cemetery of Montjuïc in later constructions. This reuse of materials was nothing new in the city; in fact it had been a habitual practice since Roman times. At Carrer Marlet, 1, is the plaque commemorating Rabbi Samuel ha-Sardi. The epigraphic remains that are embedded in the walls of the Lieutenant's Palace are very visible in Plaça de Sant Iu, in the Plaça del Rei and along the Barcelona City History Museum's archaeological route which passes underneath the square and the royal palace.

Stone plaque with the inscription "House" reused in Carrer Arc de Sant Ramon. Photo: Barcelona Archaeology Service.



**MAJOR CALL.** The first Jewish community that resided in Barcelona must have settled mainly in the north-western quarter of the old grid of Barcino, where the Major *Call* was formed. In the mid 13th century, the increase in size of the Jewish population forced the creation of a second Jewish neighbourhood, the Minor *Call*, close to the first but outside the old Roman city walls. The boundaries of the Major *Call* were not totally precise because, in fact, in some of its more peripheral areas Jewish houses alternated with Christian houses. In the south it was well delimited by Carrer del Call, to the west by the old Roman city wall and to the east, it must have coincided approximately with the line of what today is Carrer del Bisbe. The northern border is the vaguest of all because Jewish houses already existed in the area delimited by what are today Carrer Sant Sever and Plaça de Sant Felip Neri.

**MINOR CALL.** In the mid 13th century, the number of Jews in the city had increased notably due to migrants arriving from Occitan lands, where they had been experiencing a difficult situation. For this reason, in the year 1257, James I of Aragon gave licence to create a new Jewish quarter in Barcelona, on the other side of the Castell Nou and outside the old Roman wall. This led to the birth of the Minor *Call*, also known as the Call d'en Sanahuja or Call de n'Angela. The boundaries of this new Jewish quarter coincided with what today are Carrers Boqueria, Rauric, Lleona and Avinyó.

### 14. URBAN STRUCTURE OF THE MINOR CALL

The central axis of this *Call* was a narrow street following the same layout as today's Carrer Ferran. It had perpendicular alleys that still exist and at the top end they now open onto Carrer Boqueria. King James II of Aragon and the bishop of Barcelona granted a licence to build a synagogue, in 1292 and 1297, respectively. It was built in a small square off the main road. After the riots of 1391, the Minor *Call* was occupied by families of converts who settled there with their businesses which included gold and silversmiths, weavers, tailors and cobblers.

### 15. CARRER RAURIC

This was the westernmost boundary of the Minor *Call*. Before the building of this new Jewish neighbourhood, the road was a stream gully that descended to another on Vilanova dels Còdols. Its course was diverted at Riera del Pi, today Carrer Cardenal Casañas.

### 16. CARRER ARC DE SANTA EULÀLIA

This street is accessed from Carrer Boqueria. Under the vault we can see the face of a wall from the mediaeval tower of Santa Eulàlia, which was subsequently incorporated into an 18th century house. Some alleys, no longer in existence, connected Carrers Volta de Remel and Arc de Santa Eulàlia. On the Carrer Boqueria side, today's constructions are arranged over the mediaeval plots. On the Carrer Ferran side, in contrast, the plots were modified following its opening in the mid 19th century.



### 17. CARRER VOLTA DE REMEL

The street's mediaeval name was Carrer Arc d'en Sanahuja, due to the arch or vault that existed at the street's intersection with Carrer Boqueria. This vault forms part of a casa of mediaeval origin. Under the vault there is a bricked up entranceway with a semi-circular arch and, if one advances along the alley, the 13th century mediaeval tower can be seen.



### 18. CARRER TRES LLITS

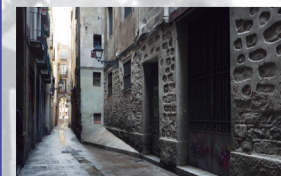
This street, which today opens on to the Plaça Reial and is the continuation of the Carrer Lleona, perhaps owes its name to the *tressalits* (in mediaeval Catalan *tressalit* or *transallit* is a pejorative term meaning "turncoat"), in other words, the converts who must have lived there after 1391.

### 19. MINOR CALL SYNAGOGUE

In 1395, King Joan I of Aragon approved the demolition of this synagogue, in line with the initiative of a group of converts who wanted to construct in its place a chapel dedicated to the Holy Trinity and establish a Trinitarian order of monks there. The church of the Trinitarian monastery was rebuilt and extended from the 16th century onwards. Since the 19th century it is the base of the parish of Sant Jaume.

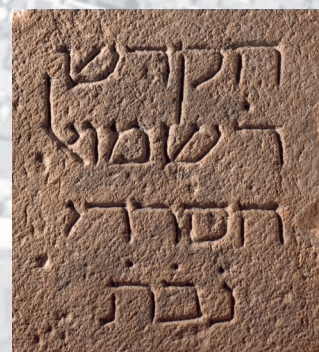
### 20. CARRER DE LLEONA

This was the threshold that, on the seaward side, separated the Minor *Call* from the rest of the urban fabric, which at that time was expanding fast. Its name refers, probably, to the fact that in the 14th century, there was an enclosure or yard here for the lions of the royal zoo. The royal lionkeeper was usually a Jew and the *aljama* had the obligation of paying for the food of the animals in the King's collection.



### 13. NEW BATHS

The New Baths were constructed outside the old Roman walled enclosure by virtue of an agreement or contract between Count Ramon Berenguer IV and a Jewish associate, Abraham Bonastruc, in 1160. They were situated in the street of the same name, on the corner of Carrer Boqueria, and did not form part of the *Call* itself. They were called the New Baths to distinguish them from the Old Baths, in what was then called the Vilanova neighbourhood, close to Santa Maria del Mar. The remains of these baths were demolished in 1834 and some prints are conserved from the time they were demolished.



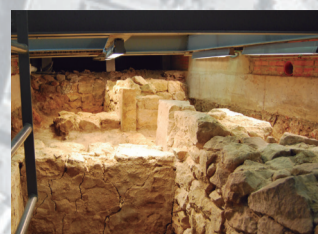
### 12. RABBI SAMUEL HA-SARDI'S PIOUS FOUNDATION

Close to the crossroads between Carrers Marlet and Arc de Sant Ramon stood the headquarters of a charitable institution founded by Samuel ben Isaac ha-Sardi, rabbi and *proham* of the *aljama*, as indicated in the Hebrew inscription found there and that in the year 1826 was incorporated into the façade of Carrer Marlet, 1 (the stone plaque at the site is a copy of the original which is under the custody of the Barcelona City History Museum). The inscription translates as: "Pious charitable house / of Rabbi Samuel / ha-Sardi / The generous person will prosper" (Pr. 11, 25). Another interpretation of the last phrase is the Hebrew expression "NBT: Neró bo er tamid" (May his light always shine).



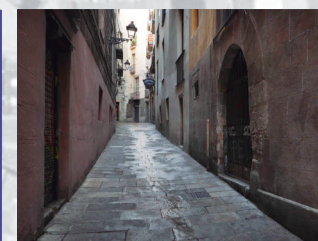
### 11. CARRER L'ARC DE SANT RAMON DEL CALL

In mediaeval times this street was known as Carrer Banys Freds. According to the written documentation, the street housed some baths that must have corresponded with a *mikveh* or ritual bath house of the *Call*. The baths were close to the French Synagogue, to the west of the crossroads with Carrer Marlet. The lower end of Carrer Arc de Sant Ramon was opened to Carrer del Call after 1391.



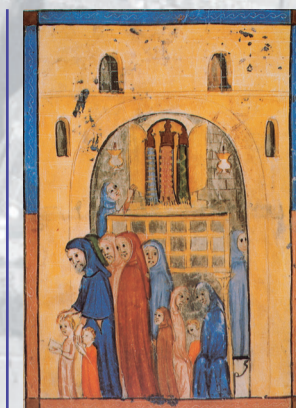
### 10. HOUSE OF JOSEPH BONHIAC (BARCELONA CITY HISTORY MUSEUM)

At the base of the building the archaeological remains can be seen of the house that belonged to Joseph Bonhiac, a weaver of veils. The construction underwent very important alterations over the course of the centuries and today it houses the Barcelona City History Museum's centre in the *Call*.



### 9. CARRER DE SANT SEVER AND BAIXADA DE SANTA EULÀLIA

In mediaeval times, these two streets were a single street, Carrer de la Volta, which was cut off by the Roman city wall, at one end and by the properties of the canons, at the other. At number 3 Baixada de Santa Eulàlia it has been possible to study a mediaeval building attached to the wall. Reused material in the form of a stone plaque with an inscription in Hebrew appeared here.



### 8. MAJOR SYNAGOGUE

It is known from documentation that the synagogue and its attached rooms and offices were on the street block today delimited by Carrers Sant Domènec, Marlet, Arc de Sant Ramon and the modern Plaça Manuel Ribé. Its central section and the main entrance were where number 9 of Carrer de Sant Domènec stands today.



### 7. CARRER DE SANT DOMÈNEC DEL CALL

The gate on Carrer de Sant Domènec, known back then as Carrer de la Sinagoga Major or Carrer de la Carnisseria del Call, allowed access to this road, which was the nerve centre of the neighbourhood, home to the Major Synagogue, the houses of the wealthiest Jews and, right at the entrance, the butcher's shop. At the top end was what was known as the Massot synagogue. Inside a house there, a block of reused stone was found that had a cavity for a mezuzah case.

### 6. MEDIAEVAL SILOS AT A ROMAN DOMUS ON CARRER DE LA FRUITA

The large silos found when excavating the subsoil of a building reconstructed in the 19th century were located on top of an old Roman *domus* and under the 14th-century houses that had been owned by Massot Avengenà, Jafudà Llobell and Mahir Llobell. They were designed to store grain. They were built in the 12th century and progressively taken out of use between the late 13th and the 14th century.



### 5. POCA OR XICA SYNAGOGUE

This synagogue was situated in the area currently occupied by the Palau de la Generalitat, on the ground floor, right along the vertical now occupied by the chapel of Sant Jordi. An alleyway allowed access from Carrer de la Font, today Carrer de Sant Honorat.



### 4. CARRER DE SANT HONORAT

In mediaeval times, Carrer de Sant Honorat was known by the name of Carrer de la Font. It was home to a Gothic fountain built in times of King Peter the Ceremonious (14th century) for use by the Jews, in order to avoid tensions with the Christians. The houses that are situated on the right bordered those of Carrer del Bisbe and constituted the eastern boundary of the neighbourhood. The noble house that juts out from the main line of the street – which is the oldest element of the Palau de la Generalitat – stands partly on the site of what was once the house of Moshe ben Nathaniel of Tàrraga, rabbi, poet and trader, and which was later inhabited by the royal surgeon Bonjuha Cabrit. Once the *Call* had disappeared, the deputies of the General purchased it to construct their headquarters there. The street was inhabited by renowned physicians and surgeons.



### 1. THE CASTELL NOU

The Castell Nou (New Castle), of which no traces remain, was one of the most important buildings located close to the *Call*. During the riots of August 1391, the Jews sought refuge there. The attackers besieged it and those sheltering inside were forced to leave and made to choose between conversion or death.



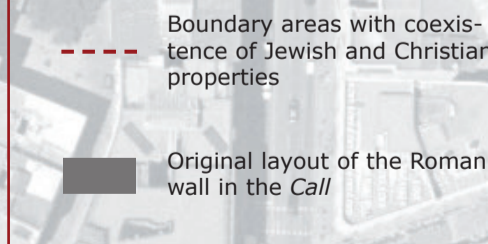
### 2. CARRER DEL CALL

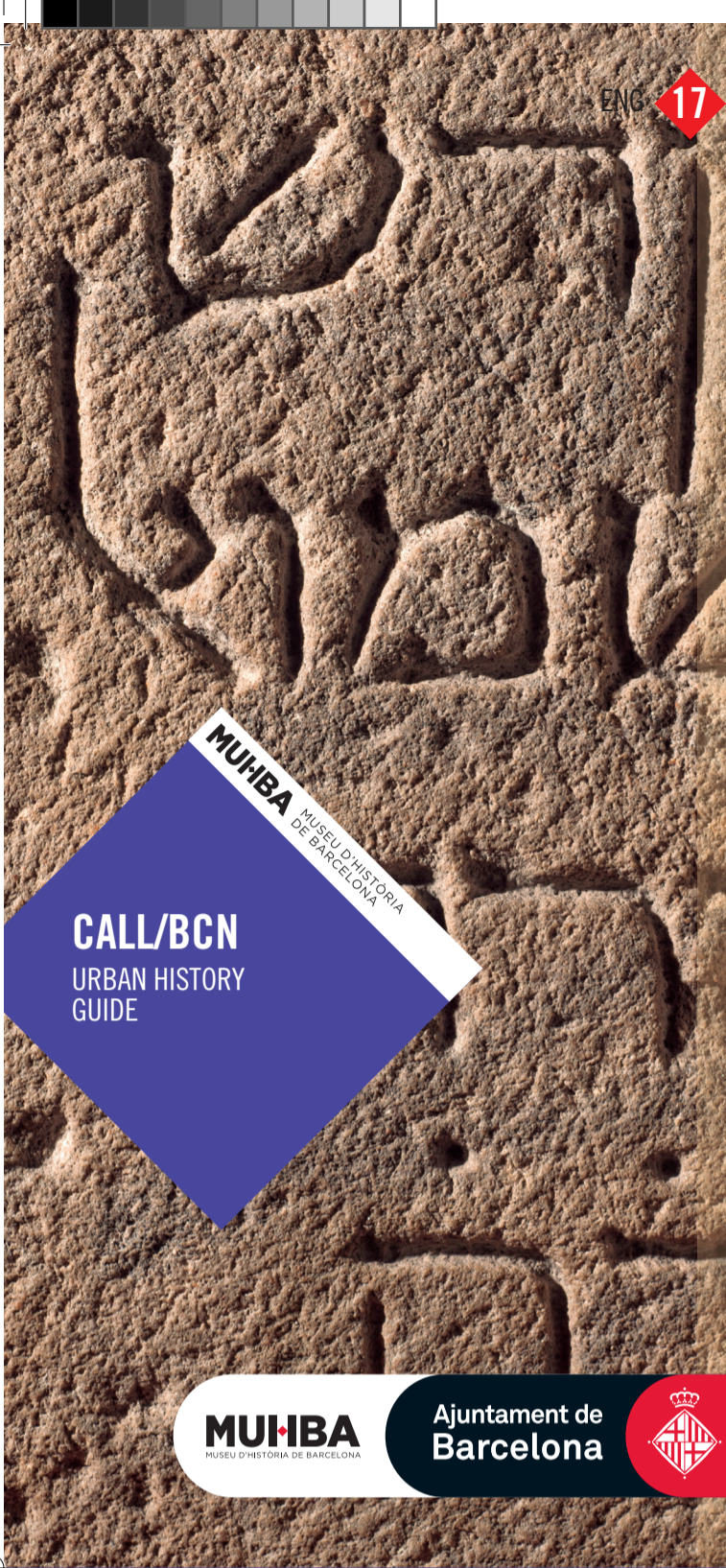
Known in mediaeval times as Carrer Torners, Carrer del Call was one of the streets with the most dynamic commerce. Initially it followed the straight line of the Roman *cardo maximus*, but it took an oblique direction once the Castell Nou gate was closed. Subsequently a gap was made in the Roman wall and Carrer del Call was able to connect with Carrer Banys Nous.



### 3. ENTRY INTO THE CALL

Access to the Major *Call* was through two gates opened, respectively, on the streets know today as Carrers Sant Domènec and Sant Honorat. The housing rental payment of the *Call*'s gateman or portierus was considered public expenditure.





MUHA MUSEU D'HISTÒRIA DE BARCELONA CALL/BCN URBAN HISTORY GUIDE

MUHA Ajuntament de Barcelona

bcn.cat/museuhistoria

Barcelona City History Museum (Museu d'Història de Barcelona) Plaza del Rei, s/n 08002 Barcelona

- MUHA URBAN HISTORY GUIDES 1. BARCINO/BCN 2. GAUDI/BCN 3. DIAGONAL/BCN 4. PARKS/BCN 5. GOTHIC/BCN 6. WATER/BCN 7. SHANTY TOWNS/BCN 8. DEFENCE 1936-39/BCN 9. THE ORIENT/BCN 10. SEAT 1950-65/BCN 11. POBLENOU/BCN 12. THEATRES/BCN 13. COOPERATIVES 1842-1939/BCN 14. INDIANAS/BCN 15. REARGUARD 16. ROMANESQUE 11TH-12TH C./BCN

© of the MUHA edition, 2015 1st edition: February 2015 AUTHORS: Eulàlia Vernet, Anna Rich and Carles Puigferrat EDITORS: Núria Miró, Jaume Riera and Joan Roca PHOTOGRAPHY: Archivio di Stato di Firenze, General Archive of Diputació de Barcelona, Historical Archive of the City of Barcelona, The British Library, Cartographic and Geographic Institute of Catalonia, Barcelona City History Museum (MUHA), Barcelona Archaeology Service, Zemaljski Muzej Bosne i Hercegovine, Pepe Herrero, Antonio Lajusticia, Núria Miró, Pep Parer. Cover: Stone plaque commemorating the founding of the Pious Foundation of Rabbi Samuel ha-Sardi. Photo: Pep Parer EDITORIAL COORDINATION: Ana Shelly DESIGN AND TYPESETTING: Montserrat Cucurella-Jorba

THE JEWISH PRESENCE IN BARCELONA

It is not known, at present, when the first Jews reached the Iberian Peninsula. If we take into account that Barcino was a Roman colony founded some two thousand years ago along the route of the Via Augusta, we can suppose that they were present from a very early stage, as they were in other coastal urban centres of antiquity.

The first documented reference of the Jewish presence in Barcelona dates from the years 875-877, in times of Frankish rule. It is a letter of donation from Charles the Bald to the Cathedral, which mentions a Hebrew man called Judah or Judacot, who acted as messenger between the king and Bishop Frodoí. But references continue to be very scarce until the 11th century, with the first mentions of the Call or neighbourhood where the Jews lived. From that point on, the archives of Barcelona conserve documents in Hebrew and in Latin which indicate an active presence of Jews in the life of the city.



Pottery found in the Call, 13th-14th century. MUHBA. Photo: Pep Parer.

Notarial records in Barcelona contain a large quantity of information on the economic activity of Jews in Barcelona in the 13th and 14th century, showing their intervention in mercantile activities related with trade with the East and with the development of money-lending. The Crown of Aragon Archive also contains parchments relating to the royal estate and records from the royal Chancery that offer clear evidence regarding participation of the wealthiest Jews in the city in activities involving money-lending to members of the Royal Family for financing the Crown's enterprises.

Christians and Jews were neighbours and coincided in numerous activities. Their coexistence experienced ups and downs at different times. Restrictions affecting Jews started to be intensified throughout Europe with the measures of the Third and Fourth Councils of the Lateran (1179 and 1215) against doctrines considered heresy, which established that Jews should wear special dress to distinguish them and remain confined to the Jewish neighbourhoods. However, enforcement of the Church's dictates was variable: during the long reign of James I of Aragon, these regulations had little effect on the Jewish neighbourhoods in his domains, which precisely at that point achieved their formal recognition as aljamas (Jewish quarters).



Pressure mounted against the Jews, above all through impetus from the Dominican monks, upon whose request, in 1263, the notorious Disputation of Barcelona was held between Friar Pablo Cristiani, a convert, and Rabbi Mosche ben Nachman of Girona, also known as Rabbi Nahmanides. The debate centred on whether the Messiah, long-awaited by the Jews, had actually already appeared. However, despite this pressure, the institutional framework was quite solid and the Jews were recognised for their capital role in the urban economy and in affairs of the monarchy. The situation was different from the second third of the 14th century, in times of acute and prolonged social crisis, when anti-Judaism wreaked havoc, despite royal regulations aiming to curb it. The serious attack on Barcelona's Call in 1348 because of the black plague was a very severe blow and the aljama never recovered from the terrible riot of 1391. It marked the end of the organised Jewish community and of the Call as a neighbourhood inhabited by Jews.

THE ALJAMA, THE MONARCHY AND THE CITY

The Jews had a different legal status to the Christians, with whom they lived and worked. They received protection from the monarch, but were considered one of his possessions. The king referred to them as his "coffer and his treasure" and stood as their protector and "shield". The aljama of Barcelona, the largest under the Catalan-Aragonese Crown, was a very important source of funds for the royal treasury. At the same time, the ruling elites of the aljama maintained close ties with the monarch. Many Jews participated actively in royal enterprises and affairs, holding important positions in administrative, diplomatic and scientific activity areas. However, this relationship between the Jewish community and the monarch was increasingly affected by the intolerance incited by the Church in its zeal for controlling the urban groups that were in expansion at that time. The kings always acted seeking a balance between their own interests, which led them to protect the aljamas, and the effects of ecclesiastic pressure on the sentiment of the people.

James I of Aragon (1213-1276) was the monarch that recognised a specific legal status for the Jewish community of Barcelona. A royal privilege of 1241, granted eight years before the privilege that instituted the city's government, granted Jews the right to choose law-worthy men (prohoms) to administer justice within their own community. The legal recognition of the Jewish community and of the urban community were based on different fundaments, but had a similar mechanism: the awarding of parcels of power in exchange for guaranteeing collection by the Crown of the taxes demanded by the king. In both cases, Jewish and Christian alike, the old oligarchy was losing power against an emerging middle class.



Jews before authority. Sarajevo Haggadah, Barcelona, 14th century. Zemaljski Muzej Bosne i Hercegovine.

The privilege granted in 1241 was the first step towards conceding a form of own government in exchange for the obligation of sharing and collecting royal taxes among the members of the Jewish community. With time, the aljama came to be governed by a council that elected its administrative officers, direct executors of the king's requests for tax collections. This system reinforced the links between the Jewish community of Barcelona and Jewish communities elsewhere in Catalonia, because Barcelona was the capital of a fiscal district or collecta that included the aljamas of Tarragona, Manresa, Cervera, Vilafranca del Penedès and Montblanc, upon which, in turn, other smaller towns were fiscally dependent.

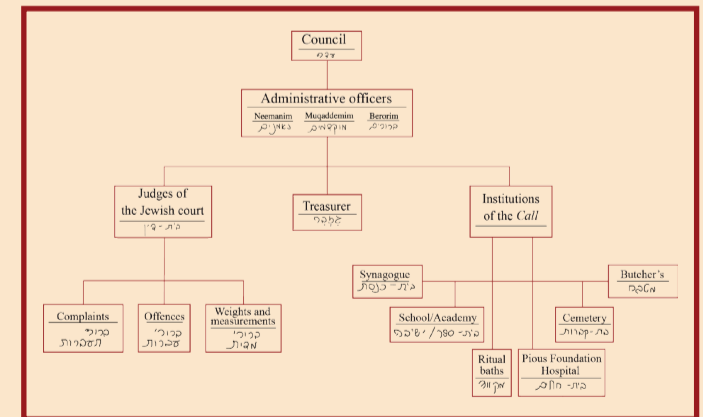


Chart showing the functioning of the Barcelona community (Manuel Forcano)

The 13th century and the first third of the 14th were, overall, a period of splendour for Barcelona's Call. After that, the situation became more difficult. Although Peter III the Ceremonious (1336-1387) reinforced protection of the Jews, putting an end to a period marked by restrictions of their rights and of the professions they could hold in the royal administration, his measures turned out to be insufficient to guarantee security at times of severe crisis.



Ring bearing the name Astruga which means "luck". It was a common name among women living in the Call, 13th-14th centuries. MUHBA.

A succession of poor harvests, repeated outbreaks of the plague and increased tax pressures due to wars generated profound and long-lasting economic, social and political unrest. The accumulated resentment was easily directed against the Jews, who were seen as part of the royal estate. This meant that, since Jews were the king's property, attacking Jews was a form of attacking the king. Jews were creditors of many Christians, and in attacks on Jewish communities it was common for notarial books and registers with records of the debts to be burned. Meanwhile they were stigmatised by the Church, which accused them of deicide and sacrilege. In Barcelona, conflict erupted in May 1348 when an outbreak of bubonic plague was declared. On 17 May, the Call was assaulted and around twenty Jews were killed. Other Jewish neighbourhoods also suffered attacks, particularly that of Tàrrrega.

The rioters were punished, but the Jewish community had been traumatised. In 1354, three delegations from the aljamas of Catalonia and Valencia met in Barcelona to agree and propose new protection measures to the king and the pope, although few of these ever came into force. During the second half of the 14th century, the situation of misery, epidemics and growing debt, both public and private, frequently generated tensions among Christians, among Jews and between the two sides. Anti-Judaism increased considerably, and in 1391 there was a wave of disturbances in the Jewish neighbourhoods of the crowns of Castile and Aragon.

The trouble was sparked on 6 June in Seville, where for some time the preachings of the Archdeacon of Écija, Ferrand Martínez, had been fuelling the fire. The riots, which also affected Córdoba, Toledo and many other cities of Castile, did not take long to cross borders and spread to Valencia, Jativa, Palma de Mallorca, Barcelona, Lleida and Girona, among other places. Each town presented a different set of urban conflicts, but the common feature was that, sooner or later, society's wrath was ultimately directed against the Jewish communities. John I of Castile proclaimed that it was a crime to attack Jews, because it was equal to attacking the law of God, and the law of the king, and he ordered his officials to protect the Jewish neighbourhoods. But this gesture was not sufficient to prevent the attacks.

In Barcelona, a crowd of seafarers - mercenaries who had arrived by boat to enrol on a military expedition to Sicily - and ordinary people assaulted and pillaged the Call on 5 August. Those Jews that were unable to flee found a first refuge at the Castell Nou, which on 7 August was besieged by an armed mass. When, next day, the Jews were forced out, their only alternatives were to convert or to lose their lives. In those days of the summer of 1391, around three-hundred Jews died in the city and many more converted. Royal justice acted forcefully against the rioters and the main aggressors were condemned to hang. Hasdai Crescas, leader of the kingdom's Jews, had the king's support in his attempts to restore the aljama, but the Call and the aljama of Barcelona were never to be re-established.

During the years 1396-1397, the number of Jews in the city once more grew, above all due to the arrival of people expelled from France in 1394. In the year 1403, King Martin the Humane limited the stay in the city of Jews who were passing through and, in 1423, after the Consell de Cent (governmental body) insistently requested it, King Alfonso IV granted Barcelona the perpetual privilege of not consenting the stay of Jews for more than 15 days. These measures prevented the reconstitution of the Jewish community in the city. The history of Barcelona's Jews was by then that of the converts, who had settled mainly in the old Minor Call. When the new Inquisition was implemented in the year 1487, many opted to leave the city.

THE ECONOMY AND THE SOCIETY OF THE CALL

The Jews played an important role in the city's economy. In the 10th-12th centuries, many of them worked in agriculture, but in the 13th century, as the urban economy gained importance, they sold their fields and vineyards to specialise in mercantile activities - their role was highly important in the start-up of Mediterranean trade - in craftwork and, above all, in money-lending, which they practised on a generalised level. The Jews intervened both in large loans, requested by the monarchy, municipalities and long-distance traders, and small loans, fundamental for the growth of the urban economy and agriculture.



Representation of the city of Barcelona in a letter by Gabriel de Vallesca, 1449, with the Farrell tower (signalling tower on Montjuïc) as a distinctive feature. Archivio di Stato di Firenze.

In the early Middle Ages, the Jewish community was dominated by the old pre-eminent families, the nessim, until a period of strong internal opposition to this oligarchy of distinguished people, led by traders and other business men, resulted in the latter achieving royal support. With the institutionalisation of the aljama, the old oligarchy gradually lost power, both within the community and before the king, in favour of this new middle-class elite.



Construction of a city. Barcelona Haggadah, 14th century. The British Library.

Jewish society then remained structured into three levels: the main level, which included the wealthiest traders, Jews close to the royal court, such as physicians and astrologers, those in finance and the majority of intellectuals; the middle level, which included traders, professionals and craftsmen, and the lower level, the most numerous, which was made up of workers in the employ of others and the more modest sector of the population.



Washing tableware and skinning lamb in preparation for Passover. Golden Haggadah, 14th century. The British Library.

Late into the 14th century, as Jewish participation in commercial and financial affairs waned, in the Call there was a growth in the importance of craft workers producing luxury products, such as weaving silk veils, the production of dice and the cutting of coral. All kinds of trades also existed to provide supplies such as tailors, cobblers, butchers, mattress-makers, tavern-keepers, resellers of used clothing, etc.



Fragments of coral found in the Call. MUHBA. Photo: Pep Parer.

Christians and Jews formed part of a single society and shared many aspects of urban life, while maintaining typical traditions and rules, along with religious practice, was the main cohesive element of the Jewish community. In addition to the synagogues, which were the centre of community life as places for prayer, study and meetings, the Call also had a kosher butcher's shop, a fishmonger's, a bakery, taverns, a charity institution (pia almoina) and a brothel. There were also ritual baths (mikveh), where, by rule, Jews had to purify themselves: men once a week and women following menstruation and giving birth. Kitchen utensils were also purified there. Historical documents also talk about the consumption of Jewish or kosher wine, and the purchase of palms for building booths for the Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot), in which Jews would spend a week to commemorate the time that they were wandering the desert following the flight from Egypt.

The growth in population of the Call led to an increase in the number of synagogues. By the late 14th century there were five in the Major Call: the Major Synagogue, the Women's synagogue (next to the Major synagogue), the French Synagogue, built for the refugees expelled from France in 1306, the Massot synagogue and the Poca or Xica synagogue. In the Minor or Sanahuja Call there was one situated in the spot occupied today by the parish church of Sant Jaume (former Trinitat church and convent).

THE CULTURAL AND SCIENTIFIC LEGACY OF BARCELONA'S JEWISH COMMUNITY

Over the centuries, ideas and people originating from Al-Andalus, the Mediterranean and Western Europe flowed in to Barcelona's Call. From the late 11th to the mid 14th century it was a cultural hub of the highest order and some of its leaders and intellectuals left a universal legacy.

In the final decades of the 11th and first decades of the 12th century, three main figures were prominent: Talmudist and poet Isaac ben Reuben Al-Bargelonia, Talmudist and pre-Kabbalist Judah ben Barzillai and scientist and philosopher Abraham bar Hiyya, who produced a highly original treatise on the Algebraic thinking that arrived via Al-Andalus. Later, medicine also occupied a pre-eminent position thanks to Sheshet Benveniste Nasi (who died circa 1209) and Zerachia Ben Saltell Gracià, who in the 13th century translated medical works by Galen, Avicenna and Maimonides.

Educational literature also blossomed apace in Barcelona, written under the literary genre of maqama or rhyming prose. Exponents of this genre included Joseph ben Meir ibn Zabara (born circa 1140), who wrote the Sefer Sa'asu'im [Book of Delight], and in the first half of the 13th century, Abraham ben Shmuel ibn Hasday, author of Ben ha-mélekh we-ha-nazir [The Prince and the Nazarite], a Hebrew adaptation produced based on the Arabic version of the well-known legend of Barlaam and Josaphat.

The Call of Barcelona was one of the main centres where intense controversy developed between those in favour of the rationalism of Maimonides and the anti-rationalists opposing it, a controversy that from the early 13th century was interlaced with the social conflict facing the notable families of the nessim and the emerging middle class within the Jewish community. While Abraham ben Shmuel ibn Hasday figured among those favouring Maimonides, Samuel ben Isaac ha-Sardi, author of the Sefer ha-terumat [Book of Offerings], was one of the leaders of the anti-rationalist or anti-philosophical movement.

In this culturally complex environment, the Talmudic school of Barcelona thrived, with teachers of the category of Aaron ben Joseph ha-Levi (died in the year 1300), Shlomo ben Aderet (1235-1310), his pupil Crescas Vidal and, in the 14th century, Nissim ben Reuben, Joseph ibn Habib and Isaac ben Sheshet (1326-1408). Rabbi Shlomo ben Aderet (Rashba), a capital figure of Catalan Judaism, was a Talmudist of great prestige and an eminent authority on legal matters, who wrote thousands of responsa or verdicts for questions asked of him by Jews from all over Europe. His responsa aspired to resolve doubts in the interpretation of the law and of Jewish traditions and also tackled, with notable pragmatism, the integration of the Jewish community within the framework of the society in which it lived and of its laws.

The last great Jewish thinker born in Barcelona was Hasdai Crescas (1340-1410), author of the work Or Adonai [The Light of the Lord], in which he entered into polemics with Aristotle, Maimonides and Levi ben Gerson. Crescas, as an administrative official of the aljama, had experienced first-hand the internal tensions in Barcelona's Jewish community during the long crisis of the second half of the 14th century. After the catastrophic assault on the Call in 1391, he undertook intense activity with the goal, ultimately unsuccessful, of re-establishing Barcelona's aljama. In those difficult times he counted on the support of humanist Bernat Metge, a friend of his and right-hand man of King John I.



Rabbi with students. Barcelona Haggadah, 14th century. The British Library.