



# ROOM 1

## Life within the *Call*

During the middle ages throughout Catalonia, there were Jewish People arrived in the area during the first years of Christianity or, even earlier communities that lived in co-existence with the Christian society. After the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, the large Catalan towns began to allocate urban zones, known as the *calls*, which were often differentiated and marked off specifically for the Jewish communities. In these neighborhoods the Jewish families found the necessary shelter to carry out their cultural and religious life based on the Torah and the Talmud (the written and oral law and the legal corpus of Judaism) and on the ancient rules and rituals which lay down the norms of a society which based its identity on the Law of Moses. **1**

There were different types of dwellings in the Jewish quarter of Girona. They ranged from

small houses with one or two stories, inhabited by Jewish families devoted to the crafts and commerce, to larger homes with gardens and interior patios where the wealthier families lived. A good example of this was the house known today as the *Pabordia* which was owned in the 13<sup>th</sup> century by *Astruc Ravaia*, one of the wealthiest men of the *aljama*. It had three stories, two patios and a defense tower, in addition to an annex which contained the kitchen and other outbuildings.

The houses in the *call* did not have any distinguishing external aspects or interior distributions which would indicate they were Jewish homes except for the slots for the *mezuzah*, the small, rolled-up parchment containing bible verses which was placed on the right pier of the door. So far, in Girona, thirteen stones with slots proceeding from Jewish homes have been found. The furniture and the utensils intended for domestic, everyday use did not differ from those of Christian families. The materials used were the same, as were the shapes and the uses of plates, kettles, bowls, bottles, spoons and all the kitchen tools and the family furnishings. This can be seen in the objects and jewelry, dating between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, exhibited in the museum and which were found in the excavations of the old *call* of Girona.

Life in the *call* was rather different at home, especially when it concerned aspects related to religion, the calendar, and the life cycle. Jewish law was very strict when dealing with purity



**1** Medieval town with hebrew letters; *Worms Mazor/II, fol.73r (XIIIth C), JNLU Jerusalem*



**2** Scene of a Jewish couple in a festive meal; *Mss. De Rossi 264, fol.159r (14<sup>th</sup> C), Biblioteca Palatina, Parma*

and food and with observing traditions. In these matters, the mother of the family played the major role, as she was expected to know the rules and to know how to apply them to the everyday chores. The everyday life of the Jewish women was centered around the home. They were the ones who most strictly observed the rules of the purifying rituals (at the ritual bath, or *mikve*) and of the food (Kosher rules), by rigorously following the laws. The mother was in charge of supervising and preparing the family festivities and of carrying out the appropriate rituals

during the celebrations in the home **2**. She was responsible for raising the youngest ones and for making sure that her husband and sons fulfilled their duties and obligations to the study of the Torah.

The boys were taught to read and write in Hebrew at an early age, so that by twelve years old they would be able to read the Torah at the synagogue, as was expected of a good community member. The *talmud torah*, the religious school for poor children, funded by donations and testamentary bequests, has been documented in Girona since the 14<sup>th</sup> century. In his will of 1415, Astruc Benet donated twenty-five annual salaries to “teach the Hebrew alphabet to the poor Jewish children at the house in the *call* called talmud torah” **3**. The women, on the other hand, received no education and were, for the most part, illiterate. From a very early age, the girls were raised to be wives and mothers of families, for this was what they were destined to be.



**3** Jewish school with teacher and disciples; *Sarajevo Haggadah, fol. 11v (14<sup>th</sup> C), facsimilar edition, Nahmanides Institute for Jewish Studies, Girona*