



ROOM 5

The Synagogue

The Catalan Jews spent a good part of their lives at prayer, reading the Torah and studying the Talmud, the two main pillars of medieval Judaism. These activities had to be done together with a minimum of 10 adult men, which formed a *minyán*, the necessary quorum for saying the public prayers. The Jewish community needed a place to get together in order to read and study the Holy texts. There was one of the functions of the *synagogue* or *school*, as it was referred to in medieval texts. It was also the place where religious services were celebrated, during the Sabbath, and other holidays. Marriages and circumcision rituals also took place in the synagogue. Not everywhere they built a synagogue. In small places, the community usually gathered in ordinary rooms or spaces set up for study and prayer.

The area dedicated to prayer and rituals had to be facing East so that the Torah scrolls could be placed in the arch, or cupboard, called the *Aaron ha Kodesh* **1**. The *Sefer Torah* (the Scroll of the Law) and its ornaments were the most important elements of the synagogue, and the true treasures of the community. In Girona, in 1391, the *aljama* owned seven Torah scrolls with their respective crowns (*keter*), gold plated silver and enamel shields, or breastplates, with the stamp of the city and the lion of Israel.

Inside of the Catalan synagogues, there were wooden benches distributed around the central platform, called the *bimah*, which was the pulpit from where the *hazzan*, the cantor, lead the

prayer, and from where the rabbis and the faithful proceeded with the reading of the Torah. The seats of the benches were owned by the members of the community and they could be rented or sold as the owners wished. Some of the Hebrew documents that are on view in the vitrine contains the names of the owners of the benches from the 14th synagogue from Perpignan. The women had to sit in a space



1 Inland of a synagogue with the Aaron ha-kodesh; *Sarajevo Haggadah*, fol. 34r (14 thC), facsimilar edition, Nahmanides Institute for Jewish Studies, Girona

