



ROOM 9

The secrets of heaven: astrologers and astronomers



■ Jewish astronomers and astrologers. *Codex Rossian 498, fol. 13v. Italia, 1450. Biblioteca Apostolica, Vatican.*

The art of the sciences of astronomy and astrology were highly developed among the Catalan Jews. They usually worked in the service of kings and princes, who held them in great esteem. Peter the Ceremonious showed that when he stated in his orders of tables and astronomical calculations, “We have looked for the most apt and sufficient men that we have been able to find”; most of these men were Jewish, famous “teachers of compasses” and “experts in the construction of instruments like clocks and astrolabes, which were the most important instruments for calculating time. The image shows one of them, made according to the sciences and knowledge of Jewish astronomers. The inscriptions that indicate the latitude and the

longitude are in Hebrew, and in that regard, it is one of the few examples conserved anywhere in the world.

In 1361, the Jew from Girona, Jacob David Bonjorn de Barri, made by royal order Astronomical Tables with highly precise calculations which would allow the circumstances of the eclipses of the moon and the sun to be determined. His work became a first-class arithmetic exercise, and was the result of a project that contributed in an important way to the development of medieval astronomy. Apart from his high quality as an astrologer, there are some peculiar facts about his

private life that bring him closer to us as someone who is easier to get to know. The mother of our distinguished astrologer, Esther Caravita, from Girona, was a brave woman who was able to divorce her husband, an irascible and bad-tempered man, who, it seems, did not treat her very well. Esther, in order that David Bonjorn would grant her the divorce, and the letter of repudiation (ghet), with which she could legally recover the dowry that had been contributed to the marriage, destroyed all the books and instruments of the astrologer’s workshop. She then returned to Girona, the city in which, some years before, probably towards 1333, she had given birth to her son, Jacob ben David Bonjorn de Barri.

PUT IT BACK IN ITS PLACE, THANK YOU



The culture of women

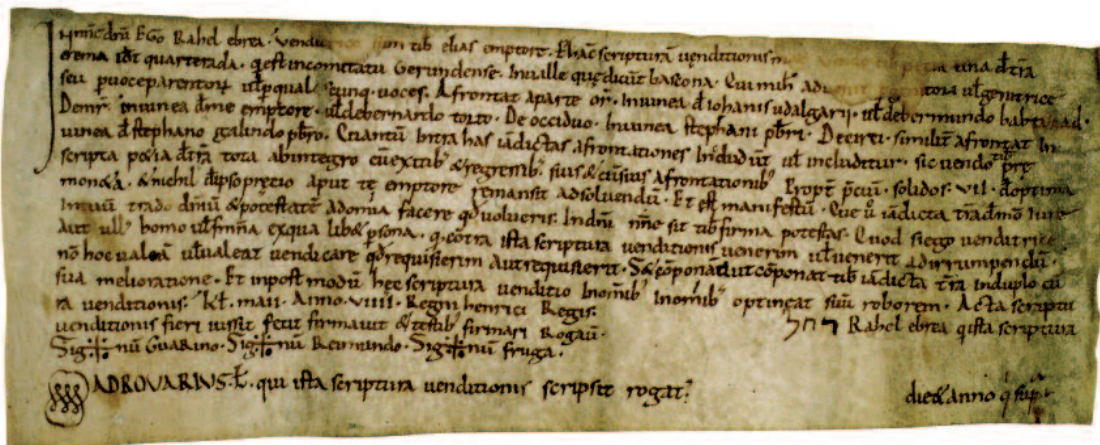
No philosophical texts written by women have been conserved. Neither does any Jewess from medieval Catalonia appear as author of a medical or scientific text. In any event, although there was certainly more illiteracy among women than the men of the communities, there are indications that lead us to believe that some women knew how to read and write. For example, Rahel, a woman who signed in Girona in 1047 a document of sale with her name in Hebrew. Therefore, it is evident women also contributed to running the important cultural legacy, and that the possibility that they were illiterate should not lead us to assume that they were uneducated.

It is certain that, during that time, the majority of cures and remedies were in the hands of women. The arts for treating illness drank from an old knowledge, which emanated from collective experience and that was mainly transmitted in oral form. In some, but only a few

cases, the practices and remedies were put down in writing. Medical texts have been conserved in which women are recognized as the first holders of learning and the arts of healing. A precious example is the book called, “The Book of Love of Women”, a feminine medicinal treatise written in Hebrew, somewhere in Provence or Catalonia in the thirteenth century, and of which a reproduction can be seen in the display case.

In addition, documents for purchases, sales, and loans have been conserved that were signed by women of Girona, Barcelona, Vic and other places. Likewise, following some registers from 1415, in the Girona’s call there were some Jewish women having good collections of Hebraic books, which content piers and remedies.

In the face of all this, we must ask ourselves, “What would have been the use of all these books and texts for female users, if really none of them had had any culture and learning?”



■ Latin document with the signature of Rahel, Jewess. Girona, 1047. Capitular Archive of Girona.