

ROOM 5

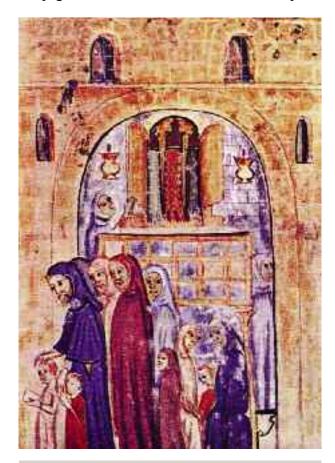
The Synagogue

he 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 minyan, 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



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

apart, separated by a window or a screen from the main prayer hall. However, in reality, the female presence in the synagogue was rare, since women only went on certain occasions such as weddings or for Purim celebrations. Three successive synagogues have been documented in Girona. The oldest, from the 11th century, was located near the pre-Romanesque cathedral. The only thing that remains from this one is a document, dated 985, which mentions the synagogue. The other two, from the 14th –15th centuries, were situated inside the call and have been located, through documents and archaeological and urban studies. One was where the present day building of Boschmonar house is now, at Força Street 21, and the other, on the St. Llorenç Street, where the Bonastruc Center is now located 2. Although the documentary evidence is still too scanty to permit completely affirm so, it is quite probable that in the second half of the 14th century there were two synagogues in use at the same time. According to a document from 1373, there was a main synagogue and a minor one. In July 1492, when King Ferdinand ordered the expulsion decree to be enforced for the Jews of Girona, the *aljama* sold the two synagogues they owned with all the buildings and outbuildings which formed the space in which the community life had taken place, such as the baths, the schools and the slaughterhouse. The older of the two synagogues had not been in use as such for over 80 years, but it was still part of the community's property. The newer synagogue, which was located where the Bonastruc Center and Museum now stands, was in use up until the eve of the expulsion.



2 Map of the Jewish Quarter of Girona: the 3 synagogues; from the exhibition "The Jewish Catalonia", MHC (Barcelona 2002)