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Review of Maya Soifer Irish, Jews and Christians in Medieval Castile: Tradition, Coexistence, and Change

Brian A. Catlos

University of Colorado at Boulder, andavis@astate.edu

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Soifer Irish, Maya. *Jews and Christians in Medieval Castile: Tradition, Coexistence, and Change*. New York: The Catholic University of America Press, 2016. xviii + 308 pp. + 3 maps.

In contrast to the history of the Jews of the Crown of Aragon, which has been the subject of considerable study in recent decades by scholars both in Spain and North America, little work has focused on the Jewish communities of Castile, particularly prior to the fifteenth century. This tendency is due, no doubt, to the general paucity of sources for the history of Castile in the High Middle Ages. Archival documentation is hardly abundant. Aside from ecclesiastical documents, one is left mainly with legal texts and chronicles. Such sources are problematic, particularly when used on their own, as they were produced by and tend to focus on the male Christian clerical and aristocratic elite, all but ignoring marginal groups. Thus Maya Soifer Irish's *Jews and Christians in Medieval Castile* is a welcome study.

The book focuses on northern, or Old, Castile and the lands of the northern route of the Camino de Santiago. As outlined in her introduction, Soifer Irish sees this "internal frontier" zone as the crucible where Castilian Christian-Jewish relations coalesced—a relationship that emerged out of northern European models rather than Andalusí precedents (4-5). Jews, she cautions, enjoyed "no 'golden age'" here, although "the community enjoyed its best years of growth and prosperity" between the 1160s and the 1260s (11).

The study unfolds over three parts consisting of eight chapters. Chapter One, "The Castilian-Leonese Monarchy and the Jews: From Fernando I to Fernando III," shows how Jews emerged as special royal subjects (*servi regis*). While they contributed through taxation to the royal fisc and providing much needed credit, they were largely ignored by the Church, despite their status as infidels. "The Jews of the Camino de Santiago" emphasizes Jews' roles as settlers in the era of the "*Reconquista*" (sic; passim), their integration with local Christians, and the friction generated by their roles as lenders, tax-farmers, and merchants. Next, "Enemy of the Faith, Asset to the Church," shows how the Church, or more properly, the institutions and individual clergy who comprised it here, approached Jews only rarely on the ideological plane, but rather on the pragmatic "corporate" plane (reviewer's terminology). "*Insolentia judeorum: The Jews and the Conciliar Legislation*" reviews the Church's formal approach to Jews, as well as their liability for tithes, and the "usury" they practiced which was at once practically necessary but morally problematic. The fifth chapter, "*Tanquam domino proprio: The Bishop and His Jews in Medieval Palencia*" is built around a case study in which the Jews (or more properly their tax revenue) was the subject of a protracted legal battle between the cathedral chapter and the town council, in which the community suffered through collateral damage. "The Jews of Castile at the End of the *Reconquista* (Post-1250): Cultural and Communal Life" proposes that Castilian Jewry took a European turn in the late thirteenth century in which she sees kabbalistic Ashkenazi gaining influence over "rationalist" (i.e. Maimonidean) Andalusí Jews, in an era where the monarchy was determined to take fuller control over the community. "Jews, Christians, and Royal Power in Northern Castile" moves into a critical era, when Jews' traditional roles in Christian society were undermined and legislation became increasingly hostile in tone, at the very moment popular resentment was fed by Christian debtors' inability to meet their

obligations. In the final, and most original chapter, “‘Insolent, Wicked People’: The Cortes and Anti-Jewish Discourse in Castile,” Soifer Irish suggests that local conciliar legislation, fed by economic anxieties, articulated the popular anti-Jewish sentiment which would ultimately manifest itself in the pogroms of 1391. The book has no separate concluding chapter; rather, five pages at the end of Chapter Eight, in which the fate of Castile’s Jews can be summed up when Enrique III “reduced the reasons for tolerating Jews to their usefulness to the Crown” (261).

Throughout the book Soifer Irish shows an excellent command of the legal sources, and makes good use of the scarce archival material available. She ably and vividly disentangles the disputes that Jews were caught up in as they faced resistance from debtors, and the competing interests and disparate agendas of Christian actors, whether royal or ecclesiastical, particularly when discussing relations with the monarchy and the municipal powers. However, the book is rather narrow in terms of methodology. Evidence from art history could have been used to flesh out Christian perceptions of Jews; in the later sections the thought of Vicent Ferrer and Francesc Eiximenis would have been illuminating. The legal sources themselves were all written by clerics whose intellectual heritage was the Latin world, the traditions of which comprised the lens through which they saw the world. Accordingly, legislation was articulated via Latin Christian concepts and categories. However, this does not mean that the Andalusi approach to *dhimma* did not contribute to this reality (a possibility the author forcefully and repeatedly rejects *a priori*). Moreover, legal texts in this age were aspirational, rather than legislative – the great *Siete Partidas* of Alfonso X (who the leading historian Maribel Fierro has suggested can be seen as “the last Almohad”) was not enforced with any consistency, when at all. It is also worth noting that the Jewish elite, from Alfonso VI’s physician, Ibn Ferruziel, to Pedro the Cruel’s treasurer, Samuel ha-Levi, were either themselves Andalusi or enamored of Andalusi culture. One wonders how these Jews saw themselves; but these sources reveal little of the internal dynamics of these Jewish communities, the individuals and families who inhabited and led them, or the agency they exercised.

In her determination to establish the “European” (as opposed to Islamicate) genealogy of Jewish policy here, Soifer Irish risks essentializing both positions. For example, *dhimma* may be characterized by *some* Muslims thinkers as embodying humiliation, but this is little different from Augustine’s position on Jews (124). Likewise, in practice, the *dhimma* “system” (sic; 3) was functionally very close to Christian policy vis-à-vis Jews and Muslims. But, what is important is that Jews in Castile, like their “Moor” (sic; passim) neighbors constituted a subject community that was structurally disadvantaged in any political or economic contest against Christian parties, as a consequence of the hierarchical/communal character of this society. Enrique III understood this world: discrimination and repression are ultimately inevitable in such an environment once the members of the majority community cease to see members of the minority community as beneficial to their interests. Soifer Irish does not propose any model for understanding Jewish status here, but the history she recounts appears to be, in fact, a “textbook example” of this reviewer’s own paradigm of *Conveniencia* or “the Principle of Convenience.” That is to say, minority communities were established as a consequence of bilateral negotiations with their Christian overlords, which were subsequently subject to periodic renegotiation, and remained secure and stable as long as

they occupied economic niches that complimented those of the majority community, who perceived benefit or utility in the maintenance of these communities. Interactions that took place on the “corporate” or “local” scale frequently flew in the face of ideological and doctrinal (“ecumenian,” for the reviewer) imperatives, and religious identity, important as it may have been was not always the determining factor in shaping relations. The period of prosperity from 1160 to 1260 was the era in which these conditions held; during the fourteenth century the Jews of Castile experienced a crisis of *conveniencia*, culminating in the pogroms of 1391.

In sum, Soifer Irish provides a solid overview of the legal status of the Jews of Old Castile from their origin to the era of 1391 and their relationships with royal, Church and municipal authorities, outlining their main economic activities, and analyzing the controversies, tensions and opportunities these generated with elements within Christian society. As whole, it can be seen as an extended case study for “the Principle of Convenience” model for understanding pre-Modern ethno-religious pluralism. The book is clearly-organized and well-written, suitable for undergraduates as well as scholarly readers; it will be of interest to historians of medieval Spain, Europe and Jewish-Christian relations.

Brian A. Catlos
University of Colorado at Boulder