

Medieval alimentation: The Hispano-Jewish Evidence (c. 1255-1310)

One of the major difficulties in reconstructing the cooking and dietary habits of mediaeval hispanic Jews is that of the sources. Indeed a number of writers on the hispanic mediaeval diet in general have remarked on this problem. That is one of the reasons why studies based on new types of sources are especially welcome as long as one recognizes the limitations of the evidence. This statement which is basic in every historian's work needs to be recalled in a field where general conclusions based on partial evidence have led to results which are sometimes absurd. It has been claimed, on the basis of Christian satirical verse that Spanish Jews were vegetarians or at least had a low level of meat consumption. Concentration on Christian legal or judiciary official sources could give a distorted picture of Jewish diet as 'conflictive'. Similarly it has been assumed that Gentiles could not slaughter animals for Jewish consumption.

The *responsa*, the questions and answers sent to particular Rabbis, are therefore doubly valuable sources. Not only do they help to diversify our store of evidence (literature, medical treatises, local and central archival records) but they also have the added value of reflecting the internal perception of diet and minimizing the distortion which has resulted in some studies which have had no access to the internal sources of the phenomenon they tried to study. Above all *responsa* reflect the realities of daily habits in a way in which codes or sanitary rules do not.

Evidently, like all other sources, *responsa* have their limitations and difficulties. I shall mention only one, that of the sheer volume of such sources: Adret's alone, preserved in c.40 manuscripts has been estimated at around ten to eleven thousand. Even the Bologna 1539 edition, which forms the basis of this study has

1255 responsa. Evidently here I shall not deal with all of these and shall restrict myself to presenting evidence which belongs to the second half of the thirteenth century and the years up to 1310 an advance of a larger study which will encompass the main responsa of the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. My sample here is based on the reading of only about eight hundred.

I. REALITY AND TRANSGRESSION

It is commonly assumed that dietary laws as opposed to other laws were observed absolutely. It is therefore of interest to see, even in a relatively small sample, evidence of the fluidity of such observance.

The salughterer, *shohet*, was not always the paragon of scholarship and strictness demanded by halakha or the Rabbis: A question from Valencia, reports that «Reuven who was in charge of slaughtering and inspecting was examined and it was found that he does not know the laws». Another concerns «a butcher whose meat was found to be *trefah* once or twice» Yet another mentions ‘it happened in our place [i.e. Barcelona] [that the slaughterer leaves the carcass between slaughtering and ritual inspection] even with Jewish salughterers and we dismissed them»¹. Similarly, evidence of Christian legal efforts to isolate Christians from Jews by means of dietary legislation do not mean that such an isolation could be maintained. As in other cases Christian priests or judges were amenable to bribes. This element of bribes has not yet been sufficiently studied as a factor in relations between Jews and Christian officials in mediaeval Spain. The following responsum is therefore particularly interesting: «to Monzon: a business [is owned] by converts...the priests [*galahim*] want to forbid [the gentiles] buying their slaughtered meat and [also ordered] that the Jews should not take their bread. Expenses had to be met in order to bribe the priests and the judges and shut their mouths ...the wealthy Jew of the city says he should not pay more for the bribes because he does not eat more bread or meat [than the others]...».

Katz has affirmed that «... the ritual situation is an accurate expression of the prevalent socio-religious one...Since no neutral social sphere was developed in the Middle Ages, social segregation between Jews and Gentiles was merely the logical consequence of

1 I, 218, 20, 246.

their religious separation». While it is true that no neutral social sphere was developed, Katz himself pointed out that there was a «method of maintaining personal detachment from Gentile society even while actually living together in the same household with a representative of it.»². His remarks are based mainly on Ashkenazi evidence. Some of the evidence adduced above shows that not only halakhic rules but the putative social ‘nomos’ of detachment and segregation was transgressed as well. More indicative of the lack of an absolute barrier between the two social groups could be the case mentioned in a question concerning «[Monzón] a slaughterer who slaughters the animals for a gentile butcher». But of course, as we know, slaughterhouses were common to Jews and Christians and the archival evidence for Christian slaughterers of Jewish meat in fifteenth century Saragossa is not as surprising as it might seem. Indeed Dan, Rabbi of Saragossa in the lifetime of Adret had permitted meat slaughtered by Gentile slaughterers and so had Adret. Their controversy concerned the limitations and the authorities cited to justify their decision but not the fact that a Gentile’s slaughtered meat was not ipso facto *trefah*. Had there been an absolute social we would not hear questions such as the one from «Perpignan; a gentile who comes to the house of a Jew, can he eat leavened?»³.

This reflection of the realities of daily cooking is evident in a number of areas. A minor aspect but one which is rarely mentioned in other sources concerns the less ideal conditions of the mediaeval kitchen. Thus, for example, insects seem to have been more plentiful than we might imagine reading the published studies on mediaeval hispanic cuisine. A question concerns the case of «a mosquito [which] fell into a whole pot of soup». One responsum concerns ‘those who eat lentils and beans [*ful*] and olives where plenty of worms are to be found stuck to them...». Another mentions «that worm [in new beans] is immediately recognizable because it darkens the spot where it is to be found...». Typical might be the case of «a woman [who] was inspecting vegetables and found worms and after she removed them she found three more». These insects were not restricted to the kitchen; a question concerns «ants [which] fell into a druggist’s preparation ...is it permissible after twelve months?». Rodents are repeatedly mentioned in the responsa. Thus one ques-

2 *Exclusiveness and Tolerance* (Oxford 1961) pp. 42-3.

3 I, 246, 177.

tion concerns «wheat in which were found some grains which had been eaten by mice». Adret's answer maintains that «there is no drawer [*magera*] which is free from mice [lit. from which mice have not eaten].» Perhaps equally typical is the following question which illustrates mediaeval table manners: «spots caused by cooked foods are frequent on tablecloths. So is the custom of wiping on them the knife with which the meat is cut.»⁴.

BREAD AND GRAIN

Wheat flour and bread had been the basis of the andalusian diet. It is not surprising to find mentions of cereals and bread in the responsa. Thus, one of these concerns [Perpignan] «split wheat which was found in bread». Cereals are also mentioned though they are also a legal category «you [Perpignan] asked how we permit nowadays [to consume] last year's crop...». The responsum mentions: «most of the five species [wheat, barley, rye, oat and spelt]...»⁵.

Bread was made at home and at times even the grain was milled at home: «is someone who has no bread allowed to grind during *hol ha-mo'ed*». From Tudela comes a question which tells how in «all these regions [*glilot*] the custom is to amass the dough for a long time». Ovens were communal for Jews and Christians: «They also are accustomed to ammass the dough at home and then take it to the *forni* [thus in the Hebrew text: *FWRNY*] which is a distance of five or ten houses away...». Responsa also furnish details on the baking process itself: «you also said that they are used to cut off a little of the dough and moisten it in water to stick it to the oven... and so is the custom in our place [i. e. Barcelona]». Bread could be eaten with spreads: an answer to Calatayud, refers to «a person who has a clean and comely bread... and wishes to eat it whith some relish»⁶.

Halakhic prohibitions should not be equated with complete segregation. Despite prohibitions of eating gentile bread we find questions such as the one from Monzón concernig «a Jew who helped his gentile masters to make bread». We have already mentioned the question about «Perpignan; a gentile who comes to the house of a Jew, can he eat leavened?». Even when prohibitions

4 1, 101, 274, 275, 113, 80, 488, 76.

5 1, 176, 279.

6 1, 845, 124, 207.

are maintained and strigent interpretations imposed we find a thoroughly mediaeval perception of reality. Thus a question from Monzón, concerns 'the bread of priests who are unmarried'. As the consumption of their bread cannot be said to lead to '[fraternizing with] their daughters' it is argued that it might be permitted. Adret's response includes, amongst other arguments, the fact that 'priests sometimes have sons and daughters from before they entered the priesthood. As for the great [priests] they have them [i. e. children]'⁷

WINE

Wine was a staple of the Hispano-Jewish diet. It may be recalled that in the documentation the Jews often appear as owners of vineyards. Therefore someone who does not drink wine is thought to need an explanation: [Monzon?] «a person who does not drink wine the whole year because it harms him or because he hates it». Sparkling wine was not unknown: a question from Soria asks 'what is the blessing on sparkling [*toses*] wine'. The process of wine making was not alien to the Jews. A question concerns a case in which 'at the time of wine pressing someone found a piece of leavening in the jug [keli]'. It cannot be maintained that Jews only drank the Kiddush wine: a question refers to 'wine for *kiddush*...and wine within the meal... the one is for drinking the other is subsidiary [lit. for 'service'] 'the one is important the other is only subsidiary [lit. for 'service']»⁸.

SPICES

A number of spicing and garnishing ingredients are mentioned in the responsa. At times we learn not only about the fact of their use but also about the attitudes towards the spices. A question from Mallorca gives us an insight into the perception of peppers: «green peppers [*pilpele rativta*] ...they are planted only to be dried and eaten dried and ground as a spice and only rarely when they are green or juicy». The same may be said about almonds: «almonds which are sweet when they are young give pleasure not because of the fruit itself but from its sour husk». Typically hispanic perhaps, is the use of eggs as garnish or flavouring. They were

7 1, 238, 248.

8 1, 238, 163, 486.

eaten of course, on their own as well: there is a mention of «eggs which are boiled in their shell». But they are mentioned frequently as ingredients: «eggs cooked on the fire and crushed in a mortar [used for dairy products] ...with spices and then put into a chicken» or, in another responsum «they crushed eggs and put them in the meat soup». Vinegar is also mentioned: «vinegar which was [or became] 'leavened' by alcohol». Of interest is the mention of false saffron: 'most saffron [*karkum*] in this land [Barcelona, Catalonia] is false, they put wine in it.. and they have learnt how to forge it with flour... and many mix flour with dyes... I only eat that which is taken when it is reaped and men of soul in this city have avoided it...». It should be added that the reason for its prohibition is absent in most printed versions and may be reconstructed from quotations in other texts which include the argument that strings of meat are sometimes used in producing the false saffron⁹.

MISCELLANEOUS

Because of the distances and problems of communication, regions which were isolated from the sea tended to consume fish preserved by salting or pickling. Thus a question from Meir ben Solomon ben Sahula from Guadalajara concerns «pickled fish which is pickled with non-kosher fish». Another refers to «...salting fish in a receptacle used for salting meat».

Water was drawn from the well and some details on this appear in the responsa: '...[from Tudela] our water if it is drawn before sunrise'; [responsum, i.e. Barcelona] 'we are used to draw water on one day for many days'¹⁰.

Cheese was prepared at home: «a gentile is accustomed to put milk milked by a gentile into a pot if a Jew put his milk in it is the cheese permissible». It was also sold in which case it would bear a seal of *kashrut*: «...cheese which has a seal or has 'kasher' written on it». Cheese was also served hot hence the question on the permissibility of using the same tablecloth for meat and for cheese: 'spots caused by cooked foods are frequent on table cloths. «They put cheese, hot or cold on the tablecloth»'¹¹.

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9 1, 400, 428, 46, 449, 850.

10 1, 280, 129, 125.

11 1, 143, 109, 76.