

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