CHAPTER TWO

THE CASTILIAN MONARCHY AND THE JEWS
(ELEVENTH TO THIRTEENTH CENTURIES)

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The story of the Jews in the Middle Ages brings to mind the literary topos of a simple servant becoming entangled in the affairs of the rich and powerful. In fact, the Jews were supposed to be humbler than the humblest of Christian servants. Bearing the yoke of “perpetual servitude” for their sins past and present and above all for the crime of killing the Savior, their powerlessness and subjugation were conditions for their toleration in Christendom, where the Jews were to be “held captive under princes, and expend much labour tilling the ground to the advantage of those princes and to the meager support of their own unhappy lives.” Christian theologians could be scathing in their condemnation of “Jewish perfidy,” but at least they accorded the Jews a legitimate place at the feet of medieval monarchs. Historians of the state, on the other hand, long neglected to give Jews more than a passing notice in the “majority history” of the Middle Ages. The situation began to change even before the publication of William Chester Jordan’s The French Monarchy and the Jews, but it was in large part thanks to Jordan’s scholarship that the Jews were finally acknowledged as occupying a position “at the very core of studies of medieval and, to some degree, modern European statebuilding and national identity formation.” In that book and related articles, Jordan showed that the French Crown successfully asserted its regalian right to control the Jews, tirelessly exploited them to advance its jurisdictional supremacy in the kingdom and to “resacralize” the monarchy, and eventually expelled them in order

1 Robert Grosseteste, The Letters of Robert Grosseteste, Bishop of Lincoln, ed. and trans. Frank Mantello and Joseph Goering (Toronto, 2010), p. 68. The doctrine of “perpetual servitude” of the Jews was elaborated by Pope Innocent III in his 1205 bull Et si iudaeos.
to refashion it in accordance with the “ideal of the purified Christian state.”

From Jordan’s analysis of the Capetians’ Jewry policy, and other studies that address the relations between medieval monarchies and the Jews in England, Germany, and Iberia, we know that despite making similarly worded claims of exclusive jurisdiction over the Jews, kings pursued policies that depended less on their avowed intentions and more on the situation in each particular kingdom. Despite the proliferation of studies on this subject, the legal status of the Jews in the medieval kingdom of Castile has not yet been adequately addressed. Early in the twelfth century, the rulers of Castile-León seemed much better positioned to translate theoretical claims into real power than were the kings of France, whose own directly controlled domain was still embarrassingly small. Buoyed by their role as military leaders in the ongoing war against Muslims, Castilian kings boldly used the title of “emperor of all Spain” (a conceit, to be sure), and could claim the territories gained from the successes of the Reconquista for the royal domain, accumulating holdings that “far exceeded the estates of any noble.” By the century’s end, in the fuero (charter) granted to the newly conquered city of Cuenca, the Castilian king explicitly claimed the Jews for the royal fisc, describing them as servi regis. Yet, the blunt assertion of an exclusive jurisdiction concealed a more nuanced reality. Castilian kings interpreted their monopoly on the Jews as an unrestricted right to give them away to royal supporters. The monarchy plugged the Jews into a system of reward and compensation, distributing fiscal and jurisdictional

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