In *Jews, Christian Society, and Royal Power in Medieval Barcelona*, Elka Klein sets out not only to write a new history of this critical period in the life of a major Jewish community, but also to review and revise what has become the established view of the city’s *call* (Jewish quarter/community). As the author remarks in the introductory first chapter, Yitzhak Baer’s monumental *History of the Jews of Christian Spain* of 1961 laid the foundations for subsequent studies of Jewish Iberia and has exercised a conceptual influence on later historians, which is in need of reappraisal. Baer’s characterization of the Jews of Iberia as dominated by a rabbinical elite which endeavored to preserve the community by protecting it from assimilationist threats has been too readily accepted. On the other hand, Klein points out, the debates and discussions relating to Americo Castro’s notion of *convivencia* have both illuminated and obscured the nature of Sephardic society and its place in the medieval Iberian world. Up to this point, for the Crown of Aragon, revision has focused on the post-1250 period—“the Golden Age of Aragonese Jewry”—a time by which the Barcelona community had established a special rapport with James I, and after which there is abundant archival documentation at the disposal of historians. Instead, Klein focuses on the more challenging earlier era, with the ultimate purpose of dispelling long-held assumptions regarding the origins of Jewish Barcelona, its internal life, its relation to the Christian society within which it lived and the count-kings who ruled over it, and the evolving character of the community over time. Sources are few for this early period, and the linguistic, technical and intellectual demands are significant on the historian determined to undertake such a task.

The second chapter, “The Community in Theory and Practice,” begins with an analysis of an early twelfth-century document formulary by Judah Bartzeloni (of Barcelona). Careful reading of this and other early sources reveals a community with a loose, ad hoc structure, and one to which the Christian rulers were largely indifferent—a state which engendered what Klein refers to throughout the book as “autonomy by default.” Nevertheless, from the 1080s onwards signs point towards the emergence of a Jewish elite, as certain members of the community began to style themselves as *nesi’im* and *nedivim*—designations which reflect some sort of aristocratic
status. This group is the focus of Chapter Three, “The Founding of an Elite.” Yet, rather than the hereditary governing clique which scholars have assumed the nesi’im to have comprised, Klein sees in these individuals an informal economic elite, one which closely resembled contemporary Christian probi homines both in their diverse commercial activities and their lack of formal authority and group adhesion.

Benjamin of Tudela’s late twelfth-century travelogue provides the point of departure for the fourth chapter, “Jewish Leaders and their Kings, 1160-1205.” It was in this period that royal and municipal law codes were becoming increasingly elaborate, a by-product of which was an ever more detailed definition of community. As the default subject became described more clearly on terms of Christian identity, a more precise definition of non-Christian communities was demanded as a consequence. As this took place, certain leading Jewish families of the city, such as the Benevist and ibn Hasdai, emerged simultaneously as royal functionaries and authority figures in the Jewish community. With their influence at court, members of the nesi’im families had come to dominate the Barcelona community by the 1200s, but within two generations their sense of entitlement would provoke a reaction on the part of their own subjects.

What resulted was little less than a rebellion, when a certain Samuel b. Benevist—who represented the increasingly energetic and prosperous and yet under-represented “middle class” of the community—decided to take on the power of the now entrenched nesi’im faction, as represented by the nasi and royal bailiff, Makhir b. Sheshet. The arena for this conflict was none other than the Barcelona synagogue, which was at once an organizational microcosm of local Jewish society and a physical manifestation of the community’s complex religious, political and economic power structure. As Benevist and his party rode roughshod over the traditions of the temple as a means of expressing their frustrating marginalization, Makhir brought his considerable influence to bear on the rebels, calling on allies among the royal family, Christian administrators, and the prestigious rabbinate of Languedoc to censure and punish them. Chapter Five, “Conflict in the Community, 1205-30,” shows that Makhir’s eventual victory was Pyrrhic.

The rebels’ moment would come in the fourth decade of the thirteenth century. In “The Overthrow of the Nesi’im, 1230-1241,” Klein rejects Baer’s modern liberal interpretation of the rebellion. The ideology which the rebels drew on was not “democratic,” she holds; rather, it was Maimonides’ revolutionary rationalism, the advocates of which, including the