Christian, Muslim and Jewish Women in Late Medieval Iberia

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Abstract
Scholars have studied in depth the relations among Christian, Muslim and Jews in Medieval Iberia, but they have largely ignored Christian, Muslim and Jewish women. This essay focuses on the role of these women in Medieval Iberia. It looks at their activities in the household as well as in the society in general, and especially at relationships between women of the three communities. It analyzes whether these women contributed toward a harmonious society and whether they fostered separatism or integration. It also points out how, as well as taking care of their children and tending to other domestic tasks, these women served as defenders of the cultural identity of their communities, especially in times of persecution. Although excluded from religious activities, Muslim and Jewish women in particular helped maintain the religion and culture of their ancestors.

Keywords
Medieval women, women's roles, intercultural relations

“The position of women is often considered as a test by which the civilization of a country or age may be judged,” writes Eileen Power in the opening of Medieval Women (1). She adds that the test is problematic when applied to the Middle Ages, not only because the sources are inadequate but also because “the position of women is one thing in theory, another in legal position, yet another in everyday life” (1). Power’s assertion, problematic in any society, becomes even more difficult when applied to a multicultural society, such as that of Iberia in the Middle Ages.

Though women in Iberian medieval society, as in other parts of Europe, were not allowed to hold positions in the political, cultural and economic world, their role was more than just raising children and caring for the
family. While women did not generally have much influence outside the domestic private space and were limited in their public actions, they held power in other arenas. By examining the role of medieval Iberian women, in and outside the household, this essay will analyze how women contributed to society; and whether, in particular, Jewish and Muslim women encouraged separatism or cultural integration (Glick and Pi-Sunyer 147).

This is an important area of investigation because historians of medieval Iberia have studied mostly the male world. Muslim and Jewish men, though mostly excluded from political positions, were part of the economic system (albeit with different restrictions for Muslims and Jews), and Jews were also part of the cultural arena as lawyers, doctors and translators, for example. Such activities provided men an opportunity for cultural change and assimilation. Women, however, were excluded from the political and cultural spheres and played a minor economic role in the society (Herlihy 168-171; Fuente, “Mujer, trabajo y familia” 186-192). Their role in the diffusion of culture is understudied and little understood.

Inquisition trials of moriscas and judeoconversas are enlightening with regard to the position of minority women in medieval Iberia. Indeed these documents produced after the pogroms of 1391 until the end of the fifteenth century and into the sixteenth century reveal a great deal about the role of women in society. However, due to the paucity of documents, it is difficult to describe the role of women over a large cultural continuum (García-Arenal 573). Besides Inquisition documents, other available sources include literary texts, marriage contracts, documents of sale, religious rules, sermons, royal laws, fueros or local legislation and legal proceedings in royal or local courts during the fourteenth, fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth centuries in the kingdoms of Castile and Aragón.

1 Recent studies on women in the medieval kingdoms of Iberia and Europe include those by Bardsley; Beattie; and Jewell; as well as El trabajo de las mujeres en la Edad Media Hispánica and works by Dillard and Ruiz-Domène.

2 The exclusion of minorities from political rights and offices was common in the Hispanic kingdoms. Only some Jewish men held high positions in the administration of the fiscal realm. See on the topic the works of Valdeón Baruque; Álvarez Palenzuela; Fernández Conde; and Rábade Obradó.