



# The Sephardic Frontier: The "Reconquista" and the Jewish Community in Medieval Iberia (Conjunctions of Religion and Power in the Medieval Past)

*By Jonathan Ray*



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No subject looms larger over the historical landscape of medieval Spain than that of the reconquista, the rapid expansion of the power of the Christian kingdoms into the Muslim-populated lands of southern Iberia, which created a broad frontier zone that for two centuries remained a region of warfare and peril. Drawing on a large fund of unpublished material in royal, ecclesiastical, and municipal archives as well as rabbinic literature, Jonathan Ray reveals a fluid, often volatile society that transcended religious boundaries and attracted Jewish colonists from throughout the peninsula and beyond.

The result was a wave of Jewish settlements marked by a high degree of openness, mobility, and interaction with both Christians and Muslims. Ray's view challenges the traditional historiography, which holds that Sephardic communities, already fully developed, were simply reestablished on the frontier. In the early years of settlement, Iberia's crusader kings actively supported Jewish economic and political activity, and Jewish interaction with their Christian neighbors was extensive.

Only as the frontier was firmly incorporated into the political life of the peninsular states did these frontier Sephardic populations begin to forge the communal structures that resembled the older Jewish communities of the North and the interior. By the end of the thirteenth century, royal intervention had begun to restrict the amount of contact between Jewish and Christian communities, signaling the end of the open society that had marked the frontier for most of the century.



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## **Editorial Review**

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The Jews of the Iberian Peninsula and their descendants are known as Sephardim. The Jews in medieval Spain created a rich and varied culture, and it was there that the kabbalah saw its first flowering in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Ray examines the early development of Jewish communities in the various peninsular kingdoms during the transition from Muslim to Christian rule. He contends that the social, political, and economic factors of the frontier during the second half of the thirteenth century helped to create Jewish communities characterized by a high degree of fluidity. This study is divided into two parts. The first focuses on the process of Jewish immigration and settlement, and it examines Jewish landownership and the nature and diversity of economic opportunities that drew Jews to the frontier. The second traces the forces that led to the gradual constriction of Jewish society in southern Iberia and the degree to which Jewish settlers were able to endure despite the eventual "closing" of this Hispano-Jewish frontier. Insightful and engaging. *George Cohen*

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## **Review**

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"Using rabbinic sources and unpublished archives, Jonathan Ray brings Jewish settlement of the southern Iberian peninsula into clearer focus. . . . This interesting and lively book challenges the image of medieval Spanish and Portuguese society as invariably corporate and religious in its organization. The high medieval Iberian frontier, at least, was a place where the quest of individuals and families for financial and social opportunity took precedence over loyalty to rigidly defined confessional groups."?Jessica A. Coope, *American Historical Review* (June 2007)

"*The Sephardic Frontier* is a new and convincing account of the Sephardic Jews and the Spanish Reconquest. The Jews are here regarded not as beleaguered communities responding to a Christian onslaught, but rather as participants in the expansion: as immigrants, land-holders, entrepreneurs, and pioneers. Jonathan Ray employs many common themes of medieval Spanish history such as the frontier, cultural exchange, and the coexistence of religious communities. These are seen in a new way, however, as the Jews emerge as individuals, not as a confessional group, individuals with a range of opportunities and challenges brought about by the expansion of the Christian kingdoms. This allows historians to look beyond generalizations about a Golden Age of Spanish toleration followed by persecution and to regard the Jewish experience as more dynamic and individual."?Paul Freedman, Yale University

"*The Sephardic Frontier* is a pioneering book on an age of pioneers, vividly explaining how the Jews of Spain and Portugal found a space for themselves on the expanding frontiers of the Christian kingdoms, under the leadership of dynamic individuals and in the face of increasing interference by the Crown."--David Abulafia, University of Cambridge

"Jonathan Ray's *The Sephardic Frontier* is an ambitious and very important reconsideration of the establishment of Jewish settlements and the sociopolitical experience of the Jewish communities in southern Iberia during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. By focusing on the critical notion of frontier in both the geographical and social sense Ray effectively bridges the historiography of the Jews with the historiography of their neighbors and offers the reader a compelling, complex picture of the richness of Sephardic history and society during a critical period in peninsular history."--Ross Brann, Cornell University

From the Back Cover

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