In 1171, Alfons I, Count of Barcelona (also known as King Alfonso II of Aragon) led the conquest of the Muslim military fortification of Tīrwaīl or Teruel (“tower”), where he ordered a Christian settlement to be established. Five years later, he issued a fuero (code) of local laws and privileges to the new inhabitants of Teruel, in which he specified that Jews “are servants of the king [servi regis] and always pertain to the royal treasury [fisco]” (5). This statement is one of the earliest known uses in Western documentation of the expression servis regis to refer to Jews. Historians of the medieval Crown of Aragon, from Yom Tov Assis to John Boswell to David Abulafia, have studied various ways in which this legal fiction was implemented and defended in later centuries, and some have also begun to compare the Teruel fuero to claims of royal jurisdiction over minorities in other territories and kingdoms. The evolution of this issue in Castile (first seen in the Code of Cuenca, c. 1189–93) has been considered by James Powers, Jonathan Ray, and Maya Soifer Irish, and the relevance of the servis regis formula for the Capetians has similarly been studied by Gavin Langmuir. In each case and place, historians have asked how closely royal rhetoric matched real practice.

In this carefully executed study, Thomas W. Barton takes up this question of the policy of the Jews as the “treasure” or “servants” of the crown with a particular focus on the region of Tortosa in order to argue that the concept did not arise fully formed and was not universally accepted in the twelfth century but instead emerged in fits and starts over a century of power struggles between the crown and local claims of seigniorial jurisdiction. He offers a useful critique of the tendency to accept royal pronouncements of sovereignty as accurate reflections of real jurisdictional control rather than as, at times, strategic attempts to shore up royal power against local seigniorial influence. “Rather than automatically viewing any king’s claim or pronouncement as a fait accompli,” he explains, we must “condition our estimate of its influence on evidence of its local application” (162). By considering the evidence of such application, and in some cases the lack thereof, alongside detailed research on efforts by local leaders to assert and maintain seigniorial control, Barton successfully combines royal and nonroyal perspectives on jurisdiction over minorities “in order to reconstruct a more authentic historical discourse about royal authority” (16).

This study follows naturally from Barton’s earlier work, which in a series of extended articles traced patterns of settlement and the formation of jurisdictional authority in Catalonia in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In these earlier publications, Barton’s discussion of jurisdiction over minority populations focused principally on Muslims in newly conquered Christian lands. This study represents a new direction in his work in which he pursues similar questions as they relate to the place of Jews in Christian lands.

Barton elaborates his thesis across six detailed chapters. Chapter 1 treats “the legal and material foundations of Tortosa’s Jewish community” (26), documenting the perspective of the crown under Alfons I and Pere I on its claim to jurisdiction over the Jews in the wake of the initial Christian conquest of the city up to 1213. Chapter 2 looks at the development of a Jewish policy in Tortosa in the early years of the subsequent reign of Jaume I, which spanned a good portion of the thirteenth century. Chapter 3 turns to the assertions of the local seigniorial claims to authority by the Moncada family and the Templars during the thirteenth century, when the monarchy was often focused on consolidating its rule in other areas. Chapter 4 then looks at the royal reassertion of its administrative prerogatives in the second half of the thirteenth century, during the last decades of Jaume I’s reign. Chapter 5 looks at ways the crown under subsequent kings through the first quarter of
the fourteenth century (Pere II, Alfons II, and Jaume II) aimed to keep and advance the royal claims made previously against local seignorial interests. The last chapter and the epilogue aim to compare the evolution of Tortosa’s legal customs to those of other cities in the Crown of Aragon, such as Lleida, Empúries, Barcelona, Vic, and others more far afield, drawing the sound, albeit unsurprising, conclusion that “throughout medieval European society, many Jews and Muslims thus continued to live under considerably heterogeneous conditions” (210).

Although earlier analyses by Abulafia and Ray, among others, have already proposed an argument similar to Barton’s that royal jurisdiction over minorities varied by region and period and often shifted as it contended with seigniorial claims, Barton’s is the first study to treat the case of Tortosa with this level of detail. Building off the ongoing debate in Iberian historiography over the nature of cohabitation, or “convivencia,” between different religious groups, Barton also proposes naming the shifting, local negotiations surrounding coexistence and interaction between crown, lords, minorities, and other local powers as examples of “micro-convivencia,” which he defines as “the potential to produce locally differentiated experiences of convivencia” (19). In this way, Barton aims to combine the close focus of a microhistorical analysis based on local documentation with broader reflections on Iberian “coexistence” among majority and minority populations in general. As he explains, “Complex dynamics of conflict, negotiation, and collaboration involving the lords, Christian, Muslim, and Jewish townspeople, other local potentates, and only sporadically the king or royal delegates forged the localized coexistence—the unique micro-convivencia—in seigniorial Tortosa” (163). This struggle for power over minorities had an impact on the revenue from taxation as well as the rights of the crown to defend and police the Jewish population.

This study helps us remember that the policies affecting the treatment of minorities in Aragon—and one could say something similar for some other regions of Christian Iberia—were not established by simple fiat but were asserted and challenged repeatedly over numerous centuries. Although his explanation is subdued and at times dry, Barton’s thorough archival work and measured analysis are of undeniable value. With them, he offers ample proof that the legal status of minorities was in flux throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and that as a result it is essential to avoid generalizations that assume a uniform and universal royal policy or a consistent minority experience of royal protection.

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Patrick Boucheron published a long article more than ten years ago on Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s murals in the Sala dei Nove in Siena’s Palazzo Pubblico (Annales HSS, 2005: 1137–99). He has spoken and written about them since, acknowledging in his latest and most comprehensive foray to being “assiégé par des obsessions” (281). A few months after the appearance of a 2015 reprint of the book in Seuil’s Éditions Points, Boucheron concluded his inaugural lecture (December 17, 2015; www.college-de-france.fr/site/patrick-boucheron) as Professeur des pouvoirs en Europe occidentale, XIII–XVIe siècle, at the Collège de France by urging historians to be “esagerement libres.” There was enthusiastic applause in the Salle Marguerite de Navarre, particularly behind the first rows, where the sitting professors of the college were arrayed in wonder before this bright new star—Boucheron was barely fifty—in that august firmament.

Speculum 91/4 (October 2016)