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A tale of two Tolranas: Jewish women's agency and conversion in late medieval Girona*

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ABSTRACT

On 27 September 1391, a woman named Tolrana stood on the steps of the Gironella tower in Girona and, before Christian officials and her own Jewish representatives, refused to convert to Christianity or to remain married to her husband Francesc, who had converted during the recent attacks against the Jewish community. Almost thirty years later, in February 1419, the minor orphan Tolrana Benet appealed to King Alfons because she wanted to convert to Christianity but was being prevented by her Jewish guardians. She proposed to the king that she be put under the guardianship of her *converso* uncle, Lluís de Cardona. We do not know why the first Tolrana decided to end her marriage rather than convert, nor why the young Tolrana resisted familial pressures to remain Jewish. Yet both examples illustrate ways in which Jewish women exercised agency as a means of determining their own lives. This article focuses on the experiences of women to consider the intersection of agency and religious conversion in a community fraught with crisis around the turn of the fifteenth century.

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On 27 September 1391 a Jewish woman named Tolrana stood on the steps of the Gironella tower in Girona and, before Christian officials and her own Jewish representatives, publicly refused to convert to Christianity or to remain married to her husband Francesc.¹ Francesc, whose Jewish name is unknown, had converted during the recent attacks against the Jewish community. Almost thirty years later another Tolrana would stand against family and friends, only this time it was to seek conversion. The latter, a minor orphan from the influential Benet family, appealed to King Alfons of the Crown of Aragon (r. 1416–1458) in February 1419 because she wanted to convert to Christianity but was being prevented by her Jewish guardians.² She proposed to the king that she be put under the guardianship of her *converso* uncle, Lluís de Cardona. Soon after, as a *conversa*, she married her

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*Currently, Guerson and Wessell Lightfoot are working on a collaborative project concerning Jewish women and *conversas* in late medieval Catalonia.

¹Document transcribed in Battle i Prats, "Un episodio de la persecución judía de 1391," 615–17.

²Arxiu de la Corona d'Aragó, Registres de Cancelleria (hereafter ACA RC), 2470 (15 February 1419), f. 1r.

half-uncle Asbert Benet; within a year, the young Tolrana would die, leaving her extensive fortune to her new husband.³

Determining the motivations for the choices made by these two Jewish women regarding conversion is impossible, based on the extant sources. We do not know why the first Tolrana decided to end her marriage rather than convert, nor why the second Tolrana resisted familial pressures to remain Jewish and chose to convert. Indeed, identifying motives for such drastic actions of either resisting or seeking conversion is notoriously difficult.⁴ As Ryan Szpiech notes,

[t]here are ... numerous risks presented by the limitation of information and reliance on written documents that must be carefully avoided when studying leaving religions in the past. Making extrapolated assumptions about motives, identities and beliefs; assigning monolithic and singular identities and perspectives to religious communities ... reading too much into too little information. Many historical studies on conversion and apostasy find themselves limited by one or another of these methodological and theoretical assumptions.⁵

The nature of our sources – notarial records and royal letters⁶ – constrains our ability to consider the religious ramifications for the two Tolranas. While we only have a single notarial record detailing the plight of the first Tolrana, the wife of the convert Francesc Guillem de Vilareig (and we are limited in our analysis of her life because we do not yet know her natal family name), the documentation for Tolrana Benet and her family numbers in the hundreds. Written in Latin, within the context of Christian authorities, the sources do not provide any perspective on how either individual constructed her own religious identity nor do they shed light on how the Jewish community in Girona perceived the plights of these women. Thus, a goal of this article is to highlight the ways in which women maneuvered within patriarchal structures at times of great stress for their families and their community.

These two examples can be used as illustrations of how Jewish women, faced by the reshaping of their community and families, exercised agency as a means of determining their own lives. While many women's names appear in notarial records or court cases, represented by family members or procurators, the two Tolranas are present in these records, each acting on her own behalf. In a scene detailed in the notarial contract of 1391, it is Tolrana herself who appears on the steps of the Gironella tower, refusing to remain married to Francesc; likewise, in 1419, Tolrana Benet herself – not her uncle or guardian

³See as examples Arxiu Històric de Girona, Protocols Notarials (hereafter AHG PN), Berenguer Ferrer Sasala, G4: 73 (18 March 1419) and (23 March 1419); Joan Safont, G11: 42 (5 April 1419); Antoni-Bernat Ferran, G7: 83 (5 September 1419). Tolrana Benet's will is in AHG PN, Joan Safont, G11: 43 (8 September 1420), n/f.

⁴For a recent discussion of the inherent difficulty of identifying motivation for leaving one's religion, see Szpiech, "Historical Approaches to Leaving Religion," 259.

⁵Szpiech, "Historical Approaches to Leaving Religion," 261.

⁶Girona is an extraordinarily rich site for which many Hebrew documents, including wills, marriage contracts, and financial records – often in fragments used in book binding – survive from the twelfth to fifteenth centuries. Esperança Valls i Pujol has edited many of these fragments in her thesis entitled "Els fragments hebreus amb aljames catalanes de l'Arxiu Històric de Girona: estudi textual, edició paleogràfica i anàlisi lingüística." She has been leading a project since 2010 to restore and identify the hundreds of Hebrew documents of daily life of the community that have been found in Christian notarial registers in the Arxiu Històric de Girona. We ourselves have found several Hebrew account books inside two registers of the notary Pere Pinós in the AHG (G9: 37 and 40). See also David Romano, *Per a història de la Girona jueva* Vol. I-II, with a collection of documents, including those related to the business of the Jewish community and daily life. For a recent study of legal rabbinical decisions (responso) involving *conversos* in fifteenth-century Spain, see Zsom, *Conversos in the Reponsa of Sephardic Halakic Authorities in the 15th Century*. In the present article, we make use of Zsom's study where appropriate, but we have yet to encounter any Hebrew documents that shed further light on our cases.

– appeals to the king to assist in her conversion. These records do not allow us to see what was happening behind the scenes; presumably, for example, Tolrana Benet’s *converso* family members facilitated her approach to the king. Yet an analysis of such documents from the perspective of agency provides insight into the complex interactions of patriarchal ideas, familial expectations, and “the range of possible behaviors and responses” for Jewish women in the late medieval period.⁷

Each Tolrana had multiple, overlapping, conscious and unconscious reasons why she resisted or accepted conversion. These reasons were embedded in questions of religious identity, their gendered roles as wives, the dynamics within their family networks, and external pressures from Christian and Jewish authorities. As Lynn Thomas and Joan Scott have discussed, we must be wary of forcing historical subjects to be “autonomous, enlightened individuals”⁸ where agency becomes a “safety” argument rather than one which explores the “entanglement of social and political structures with personal motivations and desires [where] readily articulated intentions, frequently unspoken fantasies and ordinary efforts at survival all animate their actions.”⁹ For these reasons, the decisions made about conversion by the two Tolranas must have taken into account the complex and often contradictory forces that simultaneously constrained and supported their agency in relation to religion. These women were embedded in religious, social, and familial communities, and their ability to act within – and between – those communities as shaped by various factors, above all religious identity and gender, is explored here.

We must emphasise Thomas’s point about the ways in which “ordinary efforts at survival” impacted the decisions of the two Tolranas regarding conversion, for both lived during moments of extreme crisis for the Jewish community in Girona. The first Tolrana faced the question of conversion while taking refuge in the city tower, just after peasants had attempted to attack the stronghold during the weeks of systemic violence that rocked Girona in August and September 1391. The second lived during a time of financial strain, when the city’s Jewish community faced fiscal crises and external interference from a meddling pope who, in the 1410s, repeatedly sanctioned Christian defaults on Jewish loans. Navigating such difficult times coloured all of the decisions made by the two Tolranas, knowing the impact that conversion would have on their families. Our study thus aims to untangle the complexities of marriage, divorce, and inheritance faced by women who were navigating socio-economic pressures for conversion, in order to consider how such spaces could be opportunities for women who were not unique or exceptional to “act independently, achieve success, and exert power and authority in many aspects of their lives.”¹⁰ This article focuses on the experiences of two specific women – one who navigated marital challenges in the middle of cataclysmic violence and the other who negotiated familial conflict during a period of fiscal pressure – as part of a much larger study that considers the lives of Jewish women and *conversas* from 1391 to 1420. Our work is based on several thousand sources, including notarial documents, municipal records, and royal letters. Here the aim is to use the story of each Tolrana to highlight challenges that Jewish women and *conversas* faced in the city of Girona during a period of great change and crisis.

⁷Poska, “The Case for Agentic Gender Norms,” 361.

⁸Thomas, “Historicizing Agency,” 325; Scott, *The Fantasy of Feminist History*, 38.

⁹Thomas, “Historicizing Agency,” 330.

¹⁰Poska, “The Case for Agentic Gender Norms,” 355.

In the summer of 1391, sparked by the anti-Jewish preaching of Archdeacon Ferrán Martínez of Seville, riots against Jews erupted throughout Castile and the Crown of Aragon, leading to mass conversions and the end of large communities such as those of Valencia and Barcelona.¹¹ This event looms so large in the history of Christian-Jewish relations in Iberia that much of the historiography post 1391 deals with the long-term effects of these mass conversions, exploring questions related to the religious identity of the *conversos*.¹² There has been a growing body of work on Muslim women who converted to Christianity (*moriscas*), but Jewish women and *conversas* have featured less prominently in studies of conversion in medieval Iberia, or even in the Jewish world more broadly.¹³ Renée Melammed's *Heretics or Daughters of Israel?*, published nearly twenty years ago, continues to be one of the few that focuses explicitly on *conversas*. In it, she discusses how women in *converso* families maintained a sense of Jewish identity generations after conversion, even in the face of persecution.¹⁴

While Melammed's work and that of most *converso* scholars explore the period after 1492, when Jews were forced to decide between exile and conversion, there has been some recent examination of Jewish women and conversion before 1391. In an article published in a special issue of *Jewish History* dedicated to conversion, Paola Tartakoff examined the reasons that led Jewish women to seek conversion before 1391, and she explored the effects of such conversions.¹⁵ Based on a careful study of sources from diocesan archives in Barcelona and Girona, Tartakoff was able to show that Jewish women converted to Christianity in two broad categories: alongside their husbands and families, or independently as a form of exerting some control over their own lives. This latter category encompasses various specific motivations, including attempts to escape family conflict.¹⁶ Conversion, in this context, was a risky move and many women paid dearly for it: *conversas* often endured poverty, the suspicions of both Jewish and Christian communities, and prosecution by ecclesiastical authorities. Sarah Ifft Decker, looking at responsa from the thirteenth century, has also found cases of Iberian Jewish women who sought conversion as a way to control their own lives. In a recent article, Ifft Decker explored the interesting case of a Jewish woman from Seville who seemed to convert to Christianity in order to secure a divorce from her husband.¹⁷ The woman had a lover whom she wanted to marry but since she could not initiate a divorce from her husband, conversion to Christianity gave her a way out of the marriage. Despite such valuable studies on the period

¹¹Soifer Irish, "Towards 1391: The Anti-Jewish Preaching of Ferrán Martínez in Seville." Soifer Irish provides a recent analysis of Ferrán Martínez's anti-Jewish preaching and its local context.

¹²Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, 2:244–443; Beinart, *Conversos on Trial*; Netanyahu, *The Marranos of Spain*; Roth, *Conversos, Inquisition, and the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain*. These works are examples of the many studies written about the religious identity of *conversos*. A key debate in the field is whether Jewish converts to Christianity remained Jewish or became Christian. Gitlitz, *Secrecy and Deceit: The Religion of the Crypto-Jews*, 73–96 provides an overview of this debate. Graizbord, *Souls in Dispute* explores a more nuanced understanding of *converso* identity in the Iberian world. See also the recent studies in García-Arenal and Glazer-Eytan, eds., *Forced Conversion in Christianity, Judaism and Islam*.

¹³Tartakoff, "Jewish Women and Apostasy in the Medieval Crown of Aragon, c. 1300–1391" explores some of the reasons for the lack of interest in the conversion of women within Jewish historiography.

¹⁴Melammed, *Heretics or Daughters of Israel?*

¹⁵Tartakoff, "Jewish Women and Apostasy."

¹⁶Tartakoff, "Jewish Women and Apostasy," 16; Ifft Decker, "Conversion, Marriage, and Creative Manipulation of Law." Guerson, "Seeking Remission" considers conversion in the decade before 1391 and shows that what is often referred to as "voluntary conversion" had a wide range of motivations.

¹⁷Ifft Decker, "Conversion, Marriage, and Creative Manipulation of Law."

prior to 1391, very little is known about the immediate social effects of mass conversions in the decades after that momentous year.

The city of Girona offers us a golden opportunity to explore the effects of conversion on a Jewish community. Extensive notarial documentation survives from the period, allowing us to painstakingly recreate networks in order to map the activities of the Jewish and *converso* communities of the city. There are over 750 notarial registers covering the years from 1391 to 1450, each containing information on the daily activities of Jews and *conversos*. The registers of one notary in specific, Bernat Pintor, contain thousands of documents involving Jews. Nevertheless, while rich in number, this documentation is not easy to access. Although some Catalan notaries kept documents dealing with Jews in separate books (known as *Libri Judeorum*), this was not the case in Girona; thus, every notarial register must be combed through to locate particular individuals. Further, Jewish families often employed the service of multiple notaries, making it difficult to follow the trail of one case. For these reasons, notarial registers as a whole, and individual notarial documents, are challenging sources for historians. Formulaic in nature and constructed to ensure that certain legal regulations are met, notarial records are often sparing in detail and repetitive. A single contract says little about the people involved, but Girona's rich documentation allows us to contextualise the experiences of women like the two Tolranas through the examination of hundreds of records, providing both depth and breadth to our analysis.

Girona had a population of about 1,000 Jews in the late fourteenth century. While the community had been a prosperous one, it shared in the growing economic and fiscal crises that affected Christians and Jews across the Crown of Aragon in the final decades of that century. Public debt increased as Jewish and Christian officials struggled to deal with growing demands to finance the expansionist designs of King Pere the Ceremonious (r. 1336–1387) and the demographic losses caused by plague epidemics.¹⁸ The *aljama*¹⁹ of Girona was responsible for one quarter of the contributions made to the royal treasury by Jewish *aljamas* of the Crown of Aragon and, as royal demands increased, the Jews of Girona felt the pressure keenly.²⁰ Over the course of the fourteenth century, Jewish moneylenders were increasingly squeezed out of the Girona credit market by Christian lenders; instead, they focused their attention on the countryside.²¹ To make matters worse, the Jewish community of Girona was rocked by a series of corruption scandals over the administration of *aljama* funds in the 1350s, 60s, and 70s.²² Whether it was spurred by economic crisis or the growing millenarianism of the post-Black Death period, tensions emerged between Christians and Jews in Girona.²³ Conversion was an escape from these pressures for many Jews, and in the decade prior to 1391, Jews throughout the Crown of Aragon sought conversion to Christianity to evade debt and escape poverty or family conflicts.²⁴

¹⁸See Guerson de Oliveira, "Coping with Crises," 61–83 for an overview of the economic conditions across the Crown of Aragon and its effects on Jewish communities. For discussions of the growing public debt of Christian communities, see Morelló i Baget, *Fiscalitat i deute públic en dues viles del camp de Tarragona*; Sánchez et al., "La deuda pública en la documentación catalana;" Fynn-Paul, "Civic Debt, Civic Taxes, and Urban Unrest."

¹⁹*Aljama* refers to "a legally constituted Jewish or Muslim community, analogous to a Christian municipality." Meyerson, *A Jewish Renaissance in Fifteenth-Century Spain*, 247.

²⁰Guilleré, "Juifs et chrétiens," 61.

²¹Guilleré, "Le crédit à Gérone," 363–79.

²²Riera i Sans, *Els jueus de Girona*, 112–19.

²³Gampel, *Anti-Jewish Riots in the Crown of Aragon*, 114–15. In addition to the occasional Holy Week riot, in 1387 local youths forcefully baptised a Jewish boy in Girona, much to the distress of his family and the disapproval of the king.

²⁴Guerson, "Seeking Remission;" Tartakoff, *Between Christian and Jew*, 67–76.

The cycle of violence and conversions that marked the summer of 1391 started in Seville, where the aforementioned archdeacon had already been agitating against the Jews in the 1370s and 80s, much to the chagrin of King Juan I of Castile (r. 1379–1390) and the archbishop of Seville, Pedro Gómez Barroso. In Castile since at least the 1360s, anti-Jewish rhetoric had played a key role in political conflicts during the civil war between Pedro I and Henrique Trastámara as the latter tried to rally opposition to Pedro's rule by claiming he was a "a 'Jew lover,' a monarch under the sway of Jewish advisors," according to Maya Soifer Irish.²⁵ With the death in 1390 of both King Juan I and the archbishop leaving a power vacuum in Castile, Ferrán Martínez increased his preaching against Jews and ordered the destruction of synagogues across the archbishopric of Seville. The riots started there on 6 June 1391, killing hundreds of Jews and leading to the conversion of many more. It quickly spread to Córdoba and Toledo, reaching the Crown of Aragon by July.²⁶ The great community of Valencia was attacked on 9 July 1391 and by the next day Bishop Berenguer de Anglesola of Girona – alongside officials throughout Catalonia – received a letter from King Joan (ruler of the Crown of Aragon, which included the Kingdom of Valencia, r. 1387–1396) warning of the attack and ordering officials to be on the alert.²⁷

Despite the month of forewarning, Catalan Jews were not spared. Violence engulfed Barcelona on 5 August 1391 and five days later, peasants from the countryside around Girona marched on the city, determined to attack the Jewish community.²⁸ The Jews of Girona were able to take refuge in the well-protected Gironella tower on 10 August 1391, and they spent several months living there while tensions abated. Officials at the time reported that forty Jews were killed, acknowledging that the number might be higher since many were declared missing by their families.²⁹ On 18 August 1391, Jews who had been hiding in the homes of local Christians were moved to the Gironella tower for protection.³⁰ Queen Violant of the Crown of Aragon (r. 1380–1395), under whose jurisdiction the *aljama* of Girona belonged,³¹ expressed her outrage in numerous letters, including one from the same day in which she thanked local Christians for sheltering the Jews and ordered royal officials to open criminal proceedings against those who "grievously and offensively destroyed our tributes and the rights of the royal patrimony."³² By early September, King Joan wrote to the castellan of the Gironella tower, Ramon de Loret, to praise him for protecting the Jews. In this letter, the king confirmed that Loret should use the Jews' own funds to pay for their upkeep.³³ On 21 September, the

²⁵Soifer Irish, *Jews and Christians in Medieval Castile*, 252. Baroque, *Los judíos de Castilla y la revolución Trastámara*; Monsalvo Antón, *Teoría y evolución de un conflicto social*; Mitre Fernández, *Los judíos de Castilla en tiempo de Enrique III*; Clara Estow, *Pedro the Cruel of Castile, 1350–1369*, 155–75.

²⁶Soifer Irish, "Towards 1391," 306.

²⁷Gampel, *Anti-Jewish Riots*, 115.

²⁸Gampel, *Anti-Jewish Riots*, 92, 97–99, 116–17.

²⁹Gampel, *Anti-Jewish Riots*, 119.

³⁰Riera i Sans, "Els avalots del 1391 a Girona," 125.

³¹Violant, the niece of King Charles V of France (r. 1364–1380) married the Aragonese Prince Joan in 1380. As part of her marriage settlement, she initially received rents from a variety of cities in Catalonia and Aragon as well as the *aljama* of Calatayud in Aragon. After their marriage, Joan gave Violant income that had belonged to his first wife, Mata, which included the *aljama* of Girona. In October 1380, she was given jurisdiction over these assets. Violant would frequently intervene in municipal affairs to protect the Jews under her authority. See Gampel, *Anti-Jewish Riots*, 321–25; Riera i Sans, *Els jueus de Girona*, 121–22.

³²Quoted in Gampel, *Anti-Jewish Riots*, 160; and Riera i Sans, "Els avalots," 126: "contra tots e sengles qui tan greument han delinquit destruint nostres rendes e drets e lo patrimoni real."

³³Gampel, *Anti-Jewish Riots*, 123; Riera i Sans, "Els avalots," 126.

countryfolk unsuccessfully attacked the Gironella fortifications, and there is no evidence of further deaths of Jews.³⁴ Yet the situation remained tense: the peasants threatened that, if they were not granted access to the city, they would destroy homes of Girona citizens outside the walls.³⁵ This state of affairs lasted well into November 1391, while the Girona city council attempted to deflate tensions through various means, including lowering taxes.³⁶

We can only surmise how difficult life was for those Jews living inside the tower from late summer into autumn. By the end of September and early October, several Jews sought conversion, perhaps as a way out of the tower. On 25 September, the Jewish merchant Salamon Bonavia and his family left the Gironella tower to be baptised in the Cathedral of Girona, where Salamon adopted the name Pere Guillem Sunyer.³⁷ Of course, families did not all convert together, as we have seen with the first Tolrana. Her husband became a Christian and adopted the name of Francesc Guillem de Vilareig, and he then tried to enforce their marital bonds by appealing to Christian authorities, in particular the bishop of Girona.³⁸ Recorded only in a single notarial contract, the whole episode culminated on 27 September 1391, playing out the dramatic scene mentioned above: before the very tower where the Jews were still sheltering from persecution, Tolrana refused to live with Francesc as husband and wife. As recorded in the notarial document of that date, Tolrana boldly stated that, since her husband was a Christian, she did not want in any way to be or cohabitate with him nor to renounce Judaism and become a Christian herself.³⁹

It is evident from Tolrana's rejection of Francesc that she saw returning to live with her *converso* husband as the first step towards her own conversion to Christianity. Indeed, the regulations within canon law around the maintenance of marital relationships between Jews and converts demonstrate that such was the hope of Christian authorities. While some canonists argued that mixed marriages should be dissolved, Johannes Teutonicus had made distinctions according to gender, stating that if a woman converted "she should leave her husband, lest he recall her to her former error;" however, if the husband were the convert, the couple should remain married "for women are more easily influenced by a man than the other way around."⁴⁰ In other words, in situations such as that of Tolrana and Francesc, canonists expected that Tolrana would eventually convert. And if the Jewish spouse refused to convert or to continue living with the Christian, the convert could remarry, thus nullifying their Jewish marriage.

Within Judaism, wives often paid dearly when declining to convert with their husbands. Much like in Christianity, from the Jewish perspective conversion did not automatically lead to the end of the marriage, as an official divorce writ was needed. The husband could deny his wife a divorce, and Paola Tartakoff has demonstrated that in some

³⁴Riera i Sans, "Els avalots," 132; Gampel, *Anti-Jewish Riots*, 126–27.

³⁵Gampel, *Anti-Jewish Riots*, 127.

³⁶Riera i Sans, "Els avalots," 132.

³⁷Gampel, *Anti-Jewish Riots*, 132.

³⁸Battle i Prats, "Un episodio de la persecución judía de 1391," 616.

³⁹The notarial contract states, "Ipsaque Tolrana respondendo predictis dixit quod cum dictus vir suus erat christianus et ipsa judea nolebat aliquo modo stare vel habitare cum ipso viro suo nec se facere christiana . . ." Battle i Prats, "Un episodio de la persecución judía de 1391," 197.

⁴⁰Johannes Teutonicus, *Glossa ordinaria* C.28 q. 1 c.10 v. Iudei: "Vel dic quod aliud est si vir convertitur ad fidem et aliud si mulier. Nam si mulier convertitur, ipsa debet recedere a viro, ne vir eam revocet ad priorem errorem. Secus est si vir convertitur, quia facilius possunt viro revocare mulieres, quam econverso, nam vir caput est." Quoted in Brundage, "Inter-marriage between Christians and Jews," 29, n. 39, 38.

cases, the wife could lose control of her children.⁴¹ Questions were also raised by Jewish communities as to whether such divorce documents issued by *conversos* were even legal since Jewish law declared Gentiles unfit to bear witness or issue divorce writs.⁴² Rabbinic responsa from 1391 to 1492 illustrate the challenges faced by women trying to get a valid document of divorce from their *converso* husbands. Each case had to be assessed individually: whether conversion was forced or not and whether the *converso* in question had attempted to keep following Jewish law were matters that had to be demonstrated by the parties involved.⁴³

Some two decades after the terrible events of 1391, the Jewish community of Girona would go through another wave of conversions – in which our second Tolrana took part – this time linked to increasing economic pressures after the Disputation of Tortosa (discussed below). A year after the Jews were attacked in Girona, Queen Violant asked city officials to lower the amount of taxes the Jewish community had to pay. Mass conversion and migration from the community made it increasingly difficult for officials of the Jewish *aljama* to pay taxes and fulfil the community's debts. Queen Violant would issue repeated concessions in the years that followed, granting the *aljama* the right to collect new taxes, conceding periodical postponement of debts, and taking control of any suits against the *aljama*.⁴⁴ The financial situation of the *aljama* did not improve in the short term, and the queen then issued protections against Jewish property being seized in 1394, followed by a letter giving the *aljama* a moratorium on its debts for a period of two years along with the right to impose taxes on wine, bread, meat, and other essential goods for five years.⁴⁵ In 1409, *aljama* officials once again appealed to the queen. The members of the Jewish community found themselves so harassed by creditors over debts they could not honour that they feared the complete destruction of the *aljama*.⁴⁶ Nor was there any sign of improvement in the following decades. In 1422, royal letters were still making reference to the continual shrinking of the *aljama*,⁴⁷ and as the fifteenth century progressed, issues concerned with collecting appropriate taxes from the declining community remained on the royal radar.⁴⁸

The difficulties that the *aljama* faced in fulfilling its tax burden in the 1420s were directly related to the crises it was dealing with in the years 1415–1418. Jaume Riera i Sans, who has written extensively on the history of the *aljama* in Girona, argues that, while the Jews endured no widespread violence in this period, it was just as devastating as the violence of 1391. The early decades of the fifteenth century were marked by increasing conversion and new anti-Jewish legislation. Led by the work of Yitzhak Baer, historians have traditionally associated this worsening situation with the Disputation of Tortosa, which began in February of 1413.⁴⁹ When Christians and Jews gathered in Tortosa for

⁴¹Tartakoff, *Between Christian and Jew*, 113; Tartakoff, "Jewish Women and Apostasy," 9, 12.

⁴²Zsom, *Conversos in the Responsa of Sephardic Halakhic Authorities*, 103–04.

⁴³See Zsom, *Conversos in the Responsa of Sephardic Halakhic Authorities*, 103–11, 122–26, 128.

⁴⁴ACA RC 2041, 70v–71r (16 July 1392); ACA C 2041, 86v–87r (26 March 1393); ACA RC 2041, 103v–104r. (14 July 1393).

⁴⁵ACA RC 2042, 221v–22r (7 November 1394); ACA RC 2042, 185v–v (Barcelona, 20 August 1400); 186r–v (25 September 1400).

⁴⁶ACA RC 2033, 48v–49v (4 April 1409).

⁴⁷ACA RC 2034, 132r (9 March 1422): "Com los juheus de aljama de Gerona sien en tana disminució ..."

⁴⁸ACA RC 2583, 132v–133r (30 March 1432).

⁴⁹Riera i Sans, *Els jueus de Girona*, 162. The classic studies of the Disputation of Tortosa continue to be Pacios López, *La disputa de Tortosa*, and Riera i Sans, *La crònica en hebreu de la disputa de Tortosa*. See also a recent overview of this historiography in Cohen, *A Historian in Exile*, 37, and Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, 2:170–243.

the disputation, it was not the first time an event like this had been held in the Crown of Aragon; however, the previous disputation in the thirteenth century had been called by a king who generally respected Jewish autonomy, while the fifteenth-century iteration was led by a pope on the defensive. Scholars have analysed the reasons behind Benedict XIII's call for the Disputation of Tortosa, arguing that it was related to his gradually eroding power. An Aragonese pope ruling from Avignon, Benedict had lost the support of the French monarchy, who were agitating for the reunification of the papacy.⁵⁰ Considered by the Roman faction not pope but anti-pope, Benedict refused until his death in 1423 to accept his deposition at the Council of Constance in 1417.⁵¹ Just five years earlier, Benedict had summoned rabbis from throughout the Crown of Aragon to present the Jewish side at the disputation, and over one thousand Church dignitaries were expected to attend.⁵² Girona, as the birthplace of the great rabbi Nahmanides (1194–1270) – who represented the Jewish side at the 1263 disputation – had an important reputation among Jews of the Crown of Aragon as a leading intellectual centre. Benedict XIII sent a letter on 26 November 1412 ordering the community of Girona to send two to four representatives, in addition to Bonastruch Desmaestre and Hasday Taroç, who were mentioned by name.⁵³ The disputation began on 7 February 1413, and by the summer of 1414 several rabbis and dignitaries from Aragon had converted to Christianity.⁵⁴

While none of the Jews from the Girona delegation converted in Tortosa, notarial evidence shows that a wave of conversions in Girona started around 1415.⁵⁵ These documents do not allow us to establish a direct causal relationship between the disputation and conversions in Girona, but they do suggest a climate of increasing pressure against local Jews by secular and religious authorities. Letters sent to the king remarked that many Jews in Girona were converting as a result of the “great vexations and inconveniences” they faced at that time.⁵⁶ Whether related or not to the Disputation of Tortosa, in the following years Pope Benedict continued to intervene in the affairs of the Jews. In 1415, he issued what one scholar has referred to as “[some] of the most repressive bulls on the Jews ever published by a medieval pope.”⁵⁷ Although his authority extended mainly to the Iberian peninsula at this point, Pope Benedict issued decrees related to Jewish religious books, the appointment of Jewish judges, ensuring that Jews lived apart from Christians, compulsory sermons, matters of usury, and contracts

⁵⁰From 1309 to 1377, the papacy resided in the French city of Avignon rather than in its traditional seat in Rome. When Clement V was elected pope in 1305, he was in France and thus was crowned in the city of Lyon. For various reasons related to papal business, Clement decided to remain in the more centrally located region of France, eventually setting up his court in Avignon in 1309. Here the papacy stayed until pressured to return to Rome in early 1377, under Gregory XI. When Gregory died a few months later, in March of 1378, competing claimants were elected, resulting in the Great Schism which lasted until Martin V was elected pope at the Council of Constance in 1417. Benedict XIII was elected pope in Avignon in 1394 and considered an “anti-pope,” unlawful in the eyes of the cardinals in Rome. See Rollo-Koster, *Avignon and its Papacy, 1309–1417*.

⁵¹Barraclough, *The Medieval Papacy*, 175–80.

⁵²Maccoby, *Judaism on Trial*, 82. See also Cohen, *A Historian in Exile*, 36.

⁵³Riera i Sans, *Els jueus de Girona*, 162.

⁵⁴Riera i Sans, *Els jueus de Girona*, 163.

⁵⁵Recently, Jeremy Cohen has challenged Baer's representation of the Disputation of Tortosa as part of “a series of calamities that befell Spanish Jews along the road leading from the pogroms of 1391 to the expulsion of 1492.” Cohen, *A Historian in Exile*, 37, 60–62.

⁵⁶As, for example, a royal letter dated 21 August 1414: “de les grans vexacions e molèsties qui-ns són fetes;” see Riera i Sans, *Els jueus de Girona*, 163.

⁵⁷Simonsohn, *The Apostolic See and the Jews*, VII:32.

between Christians and Jews.⁵⁸ First promulgated in May 1415, by September of that year the pope mandated that Christians did not need to satisfy any debts they owed to Jewish moneylenders. Schlomo Simonsohn has argued that Pope Benedict had little authority at this point to enforce such restrictions; however, episcopal officials in Girona themselves ensured that the mandates were carried out.⁵⁹ Already contending with their economic implications, the Jewish community of Girona suffered another setback when, in late October of 1415, the vicar general of Girona closed the synagogue in the city.⁶⁰ He claimed that it had previously been a chapel dedicated to Sant Llorenç and thus fell under the jurisdiction of a papal bull mandating the closure of all synagogues located on the sites of former churches. Over the course of November 1415, royal, ecclesiastical, and local officials conflicted over this closure, with King Alfons V eventually issuing a series of orders to the *jurats* (municipal officials), judges, bishop, and vicar general to refrain from actions against the Jews and to reopen the synagogue and its *mikvah*, or ritual bath.⁶¹

This conflict over Girona's Jewish community between the ruling couple on the one hand, and the bishop, municipal officials, and eventually the local inquisitor on the other, would only grow in the coming years. In June 1416, the *jurats* attempted to prevent Jews from leaving the Jewish quarter on Sundays, prompting a response from Queen Violant that such actions would lead to increased rioting.⁶² Less than two months later, 400 peasants gathered in August with the intention of killing Jews in the city.⁶³ Although this attack was prevented, Jews did face the looting of their synagogue in April 1418 when a religious procession, heralding the arrival of a papal legate, entered the synagogue and destroyed some religious texts.⁶⁴

This, then, is the larger religious and economic context for the case of our second Tolrana, the daughter of the convert Dalmau Benet (Jucef Astruch Benet). On 4 March 1417, her father had converted in dramatic fashion when, for reasons unstated, he offered to become a Christian in exchange for the king's pardon of Guillem Serratós, who had been convicted in the death of a Jewish couple from Caldes de Malavella, Vidal Petit and his wife. The *converso* Dalmau Benet was deceased by early 1419 when his daughter Tolrana was desiring to convert and facing challenges from Jewish members of the family. She gained the protection of King Alfons and went to live with her maternal uncle, Lluís de Cardona, a *converso* from Solsona and her tutor after the death of Tolrana's father. Eventually able to become a Christian, Tolrana took the name Francina and married another uncle, Ferrer Astruch, the half-brother of her father, who as a recent convert became known as Asbert Benet. The royal letter detailing the king's protection of Tolrana does not indicate which family members were attempting to prevent her conversion, but we suspect that one was Regina, the widow of Dalmau Benet and Tolrana's stepmother. The Benet family was extremely influential in Girona,

⁵⁸A month later, the conditions of this bull were softened as long as Jews provided a list of the books they owned, did not demand repayment of debts by Christians via legal means, or charge any interest on loans extended to Christians. See Simonsohn, *The Apostolic See and the Jews*, VII:32.

⁵⁹Simonsohn, *The Apostolic See and the Jews*, VII:32.

⁶⁰Riera i Sans, *Els jueus de Girona*, 164.

⁶¹Riera i Sans, *Els jueus de Girona*, 164–65. See also the documents cited in Escribà Bonastre and Frago Pérez, *Documents dels jueus de Girona*, 135–36.

⁶²ACA RC 2034, 51r (27 June 1416).

⁶³Riera i Sans, *Els jueus de Girona*, 166; ACA RC 2665, 60r (14 August 1416); ACA Cartes Reales Alfons IV #256 (14 August 1416).

⁶⁴Riera i Sans, *Els jueus de Girona*, 166.

having made major contributions to the governance of the *aljama* and retaining a prominent place in the credit market. Before his conversion, Tolrana's father was nominated by Queen Violent as one of fourteen councillors for the *aljama* in 1408, and he continued in that role for several years.⁶⁵ His own father, Astruch Benet, had dominated governance of the community from the 1380s until his replacement by his son at the order of the queen in 1407.⁶⁶ Both men also engaged deeply in the credit market, extending loans to Jews and Christians alike.⁶⁷ The Benet family would keep this prominence as Christian converts, despite potential divisions among the various branches of their kin group. Another son of Astruch Benet, Ferrer Astruch, retained the strong financial position of his family after his conversion in 1419. As Asbert Benet, he received the title of "venerable," and such were his family fortunes that in his will he named a master of theology and a knight as his executors.⁶⁸

Based on the surviving documentation, including the notarial records and royal letters which detail Tolrana's case, the agency of certain women like her to determine their own religious fates seems apparent. The royal letter of 15 February 1419 presents Tolrana Benet herself as the petitioner to King Alfons, indicating her own desire to convert to Christianity, against the will of her Jewish guardians. Taken at face value, documents such as these seem to present the independence and choice of a woman who ignored familial pressure under which a patriarchal society placed them. But as Thomas and Scott remind us, we must be wary of making an argument based on the surface of such documentation. Notarial records and royal letters were constructed texts, shaped by legal formulations and bureaucratic practices. They were designed to present a desired outcome and therefore omitted much of what was going on around them: the debates and discussions that existed before and beneath the stories that were eventually written down.

These omissions can be frustrating for the historian as we are often left with more questions than answers. Was the first Tolrana having marital problems prior to 1391 and therefore her stance at the Gironella tower was less about religious identity and more an attempt to end an unhappy marriage? In the Biblical and Talmudic traditions, men could be coerced to divorce their wives in certain circumstances, such as his physical defects, impotence, the refusal of conjugal rights, or the imposition of restrictions and demands considered "unreasonable."⁶⁹ In such cases, husbands were required to return dotal property to wives. In the halakhic literature of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the reason most frequently cited for divorce was the wife's "rebellion" which was defined as her "refus[al] to have sexual relations with her husband or ... to perform those household tasks that are incumbent upon a woman."⁷⁰ Maimonides, for example, argued that if a wife said, "I find him repugnant and I cannot have intercourse with him," he is forced to divorce her immediately ... rather than following the required one-year waiting

⁶⁵Riera i Sans, *Els jueus de Girona*, 156–57.

⁶⁶Riera i Sans, *Els jueus de Girona*, 138, 143–45, 156.

⁶⁷The registers of the notary Bernat Pintor from 1390 to 1407 have hundreds of credit documents involving both father and son. These registers also include contracts where Astruch Benet acts as secretary on behalf of the *aljama*. See for example AHG PN, Bernat Pintor G7: 76 (20 September 1403), in which Benet, with the other secretaries and counsellors of the *aljama*, borrowed fifty-five pounds from a Christian.

⁶⁸AHG PN, Arnau Antoni, G3: 142, 142v–144r (14 March 1486).

⁶⁹Salaymeh, "Every Law Tells a Story," 26; Grossman, *Pious and Rebellious*, 235.

⁷⁰Grossman, *Pious and Rebellious*, 240–41.

period.⁷¹ In such circumstances, the wife was declared a *moredet* – a rebellious or recalcitrant wife – and had to forfeit her dowry.⁷²

By the late thirteenth century, however, Rabbinic scholars in northern Europe had tempered such viewpoints, limiting the ability of wives to seek court assistance to coerce their husbands into a divorce. Historians debate the reasons for these changes: were they influenced by concerns over the perceived growing numbers of women who used this mechanism for divorce, or by the perceptions of medieval rabbis that such decrees were influenced by foreign (i.e., Islamic) practices? However, it is clear that *responsa* and codes of Jewish law from this period attempted to constrain the mechanisms by which women could obtain divorces and retain their assets.⁷³ They denied the use of “repugnance” as licit grounds for coercing a husband to divorce his wife, as well as the declaration as a *moredet*.⁷⁴ Developed initially in Germanic and French lands, these divorce limitations were brought to Iberia by rabbis such as Rabbenu Asher who came to Toledo in the early fourteenth century; however, it is difficult to tell based on the extant evidence the full impact they had in abolishing rulings which followed the approach of Maimonides.⁷⁵ Regardless, the ability of Jewish women to seek divorce from their husbands for reasons related to incompatible personalities was constrained and could result in these women losing their *ketubah* (dowry) and thus their economic rights within marriage. Divorce from her Jewish husband may therefore not have been an option for the first Tolrana in our tale.

She was on firmer ground in seeking out divorce after her husband’s conversion in 1391. While Christian authorities were somewhat ambivalent in their views regarding conversion and mixed marriages, arguing that convert husbands should stay with their Jewish wives in order to encourage their conversion, Jewish authorities, not surprisingly, argued the opposite. Rabbinical opinions discounted repugnance as a licit reason for wives to seek judicial assistance for divorce, but conversion was an entirely different matter. In such cases, as Avraham Grossman has argued, courts could compel convert husbands to divorce their Jewish wives so that women who refused to become Christian could remarry Jewish men.⁷⁶ Conversion did not automatically end the marriage, and thus divorce was necessary for remarriage. Perhaps it was Francesc’s conversion to Christianity that provided Tolrana with an accepted framework within which to seek divorce.

We should not discount, however, Tolrana’s religious motivations in refusing to stay married to Francesc. While the surviving documentation in this case does not allow us to interrogate Tolrana’s intimate thoughts against conversion, scholars have demonstrated that some women, faced with similar situations, chose to renounce family life rather than to convert to Christianity. In her study of the Jewish community in Palermo after the expulsions of 1492, Nadia Zeldes provides evidence of Jewish women giving up their

⁷¹Grossman, *Pious and Rebellious*, 243.

⁷²Grossman’s analysis of the halakhic literature of the Middle Ages found that the wife’s “rebellion” was the most frequent reason for divorce in this period.

⁷³Grossman, *Pious and Rebellious*, 240–44; Salaymeh, “Every Law Tells a Story,” 33.

⁷⁴Salaymeh, “Every Law Tells a Story,” 33.

⁷⁵Deep analysis of the sparse evidence from Jewish divorce decrees issued by late medieval rabbinical courts in Iberia would help in unraveling their influence, but such evidence does not exist in enough volume to comprehend the complete picture.

⁷⁶Grossman, *Pious and Rebellious*, 240.

children in order to retain their religion. Backed by the Jewish community, these women pressured Christian officials to aid them in obtaining divorce writs (*get*) so that they would be able to remarry. Zeldes recounts the story of Asisa, whose husband, Samuel Sala, converted during the expulsion. Pregnant at the time, Asisa was ordered by Christian authorities to give up her baby once born so that it might be raised as a Christian. Asisa herself remained Jewish and obtained a *get* from Samuel.⁷⁷

Family pressures may also have been part of Tolrana's decision to stay Jewish, perhaps reflecting concerns over future children and family inheritance. While the notarial contract involving Francesc and Tolrana makes no mention of her dowry, the control of these assets after the dissolution of their marriage was likely of concern to her kin. We know from other evidence that, in the months after the violence of 1391, conflicts over the control of dotal properties erupted between couples where one spouse converted and the other did not. In November 1391, Constança, the newly converted wife of Isaac Roven, requested the return of her dowry from her husband who was reluctant to relinquish these assets. Isaac stated that, because he did not wish to convert to Christianity nor did he want to dissolve their union, his wife had no right to the restitution of her dowry.⁷⁸ While we do not know the result of Constança and Isaac's dispute over her dowry, we can track the dissolution of their union, as both spouses remarried within a few years, Constança to a prominent Christian with the title of "venerable," and Isaac to another Jewish woman from nearby Castellón d'Empuries. As dowry for her new marriage, Constança brought 10,000 sous, donated by her widowed mother, Astruga.⁷⁹ Did such a donation indicate that Constança was unable to secure the return of her dotal funds from Isaac?⁸⁰ Extant evidence cannot answer this question, but it does raise the possibility that our first Tolrana could also have faced resistance from her husband regarding the control of her dowry, which perhaps even underlay his desire to avoid the dissolution of their union.

Other examples from the early fifteenth century provide us with a clearer picture of marital property devolution in the wake of conversion. In a notarial contract from 21 November 1421, the *converso* Pere Joan Falcó agreed to return the dowry of 3,300 sous to his Jewish wife Regina. Pere had converted in 1417, at a time when many Jewish men in Girona were becoming Christians.⁸¹ This particular contract is connected to a series of documents emanating from the investigation of the Girona inquisitor Joan Vilar, all related to pressuring *converso* men to convert their Jewish wives and children or to dissolve their unions. Married in 1409 to Pere, her first cousin, Regina resisted the pressures of the inquisitor and her husband; instead, she sought divorce and the return of her *ketubah*. This dowry restitution contract indicates Regina's success in securing her assets, information that is lacking for many of the other Jewish women in our larger study, whose marriages were affected by conversion in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. The prominence of Pere and Regina's family, the Falcós, in both the *converso* and Jewish communities of Girona, points to a possible reason for

⁷⁷Zeldes, *The Former Jews of this Kingdom*, 26; Zeldes, "Aspects of Married Life of Jewish Women Converts in Italy," 3–4, 6.

⁷⁸AHG PN Cast. Pere Pellicer 480 (28 November 1391).

⁷⁹AHG PN Bernat de Dons G5: 439, f. 45v–46r (10 February 1394).

⁸⁰Salaymeh, "Every Law Tells a Story," 30, 57–58. Rabbinical scholars from the period prior to 1050 argued that wives who apostatised should be divorced by their husbands and lose all their marital assets. For the late Middle Ages, apostasy was considered a breach of marital contract and thus reason for divorce, but the ability of a convert wife to retain her dotal property appears to have been negotiable.

⁸¹AHG PN Berenguer Ferrer Sasala G4: 79, n/f (21 November 1421).

her success.⁸² Perhaps desiring to keep themselves free from inquisitorial intervention and to maintain the integrity of familial assets, the couple quietly reached an agreement.

Unlike the case of Regina and Pere Joan Falcó, we have no information about Tolrana's natal family and thus are unable to link her to other documentation from the archives in Girona. But we do know the background of our second Tolrana in much more detail since the Benets were a powerful and influential family in the Jewish community of Girona, and they left many documents through which we can trace their story. These documents raise two key questions in understanding the young Tolrana's motivations for conversion: first, what impact did her future marriage have on her decision to convert? Second, was this marriage – and thus her conversion – influenced by her deceased father's testamentary wishes or constraints? Conversion for Tolrana Benet appears to have been intricately tied to both paternal inheritance and marriage to her half-uncle, himself a very recent convert; indeed, our analysis of notarial records puts his conversion at just one month prior to Tolrana's appeal to King Alfons. What influence might Tolrana's deceased father, Dalmau Benet, and her future husband, Asbert Benet, have had on her desire to convert?

To answer these questions, we must untangle the inheritance rights of those connected to Tolrana's father, a complicated task given the role that conversion plays in this family (see Table 1). Using the notarial records, we begin with the testament concluded in 1415 by Jucef Astruch Benet, the future Christian convert known as Dalmau Benet.⁸³

After appointing two executors (his cousin Mosse Bellshom Benet and his nephew Bonanasch Alfaquim), Jucef Astruch went on to lay out the structure of inheritance rights for his current and future children. First, he named his eldest male child as universal heir. If that son died before producing his own children, the position of universal heir went to his next male child. In the event there were no living sons, his eldest daughter became universal heir. That daughter – Tolrana – was his only living child in 1415 when Jucef Astruch finalised his testament. Tolrana's position as universal heir, however, came with stipulations: “Let a marriage take place between the said Tolrana and the said Ferrer Astruch, my brother.”⁸⁴ If Tolrana were unwilling to marry her *converso* half-uncle Ferrer, she was to be removed as universal heir. In her place, the “pregnancy which the said Regina, my wife, carries in her womb, if she is pregnant and that pregnancy comes to term and produces a female child” was to become heir.⁸⁵ In such a case, Tolrana was to receive a bequest of 5,000 sous as her entire paternal inheritance. Ferrer Astruch, for his part, would receive his brother's half of their father's estate.

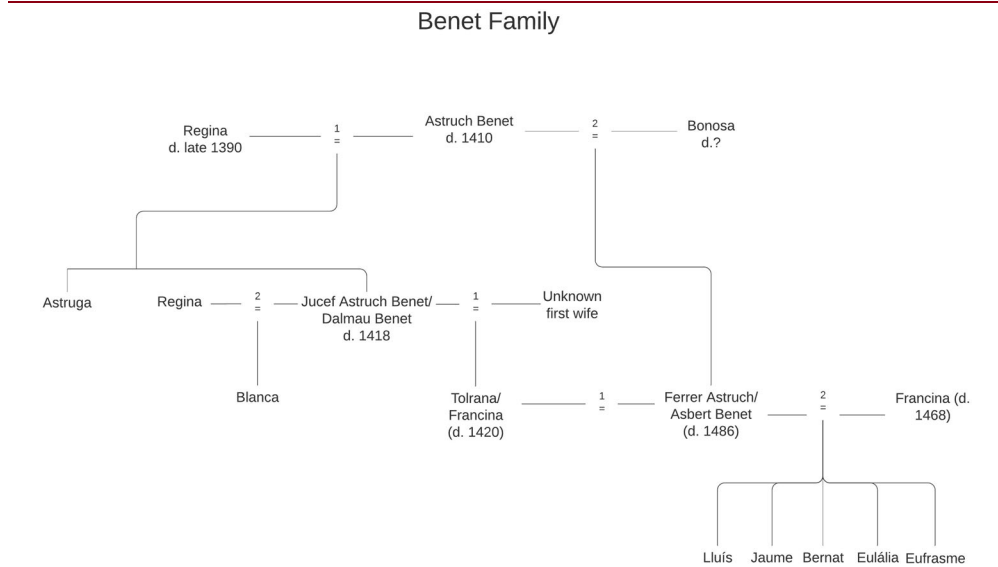
In many ways, the various clauses that made up Jucef Astruch Benet's testament fit closely within the Jewish legal framework for paternal inheritance. In the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides laid out the sequence of heirs to a father's estate. First, the assets were to be divided among any living sons, with the largest portion going to the eldest. Daughters were not to inherit but were to be provided a legacy in the form of marital

⁸²For the importance of this family in Girona, see Sobrequés Vidal, “Contribución a la historia de los judíos de Gerona – familias hebreas gerundenses: Los Falcó.”

⁸³AHG PN, Berenguer Ferrer Sasala, G4: 61 (27 June 1415).

⁸⁴“Fiat matrimonium inter ipsam Tolranam et dictum Ferrarum Astruch fratrem meum,” AHG PN, Berenguer Ferrer Sasala, G4: 61 (27 June 1415).

⁸⁵“facio et instituo praegnatum que dicta Regina uxor mea gerit in utero si praegnans est et praegnatus ipse ad lucem pervenitur et femina inde exierit,” AHG PN, Berenguer Ferrer Sasala, G4: 61 (27 June 1415).

Table 1: Benet family tree.

assets. If there were no living sons, daughters would inherit equally.⁸⁶ A wife would have no claim over her husband's property beyond what was stipulated in her *ketubah* and the property she brought into the marriage.⁸⁷ Jucef Astruch Benet indicated at the beginning of his testament that his death was not imminent; rather, "of sound mind and body, in good sense and full memory,"⁸⁸ the testator was laying out his wishes for the future, thus his inclusion of potential children, while also recognising his sole living daughter, Tolrana. The use of a Christian notary to write this will was not at all unusual: the Jews of Girona and elsewhere in the Crown of Aragon were accustomed to do so, and rabbinical courts accepted wills drafted by Christian scribes as valid.⁸⁹

Two years later, Jucef Astruch Benet converted to Christianity, and then on 1 September 1418, he made a verbal addendum to his written testament.⁹⁰ Now as Dalmau Benet, he indicated that he was gravely ill and on his deathbed. Recorded in Catalan, Dalmau recognised his role as guardian of his half-brother Ferrer Astruch, alongside his stepmother Bonosa, while also indicating that Bonosa had done little to fulfil that role in managing Ferrer Astruch's estate. Next Dalmau reemphasized Ferrer's rights to their paternal inheritance, noting in particular that he should receive half of Dalmau's property. No mention is made here of Tolrana. By 18 September, Dalmau had died; a week later, a new heir to his estate appeared in the notarial documentation: his newborn daughter Blanca. Born on 25 September to her *converso* father and Jewish mother,⁹¹ Blanca was considered Christian, and the local judicial magistrate placed the infant under the guardianship of Andreu de

⁸⁶Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Inheritance, 1.1–3, cited in Klein, "The Widow's Portion," 149. Also see Klein, "Splitting Heirs."

⁸⁷Zsom, *Conversos in the Responsa of Sephardic Halakhic Authorities*, 175.

⁸⁸"... sanus per dei gratiam mente et corpore immo que bono sensu plenaque memoria ..." AHG PN, Berenguer Ferrer Sasala, G4: 61 (27 June 1415).

⁸⁹Zsom, *Conversos in the Responsa of Sephardic Halakhic Authorities*, 175. See also Klein, "Splitting Heirs," 55; Robert Burns, "Jews in the Notarial Culture," 90.

⁹⁰AHG PN, Miquel Pere, G1: 375 (1 September 1418).

⁹¹Guerson and Wessell Lightfoot, "Mixed Marriages and Community Identity."

Biura and Joan Sa Val. In the coming months, these two men would act on Blanca's behalf as the complex task of dividing Dalmau Benet's estate was carried out.

Over the course of January and February 1419, Blanca's tutors, along with various Christians appointed as their procurators, appear in notarial documents alongside the newly converted Asbert Benet (formerly Ferrer Astruch)⁹² and his procurators, most often other *conversos*. Blanca and Asbert were listed as heirs of Dalmau Benet in these records which relate to arbitration settlements with others *conversos*, as well as the buying, selling, and management of credit notes and loans extended by Dalmau Benet. Tolrana is markedly absent from these documents. Given the terms of Dalmau Benet's original testament, it seems that Blanca had superceded her sister as heir of their father because at the time of his death, Tolrana was not married to Ferrer. According to Dalmau's will, the lack of marriage between uncle and niece removed Tolrana as heir, ensured that Ferrer received his share of Asbert Benet's estate, and placed Blanca – the foreshadowed “pregnancy which the said Regina, my wife, carries in her womb” – as universal heir. Language in the January and February 1419 notarial documents confirms this testamentary framework, with Blanca listed as universal heir of Dalmau Benet and Asbert as heir of Astruch Benet plus half of the assets of Dalmau.

By 23 March 1419, however, the situation had changed: Tolrana now appears in notarial records as “heir of Dalmau Benet.” The first instance in which she was identified in this manner comes from an addendum to the January 1419 document noted above.⁹³ Connected to an arbitration case, the addendum states that the *converso* Dalmau Dala, acting as procurator for Lluís de Cardona, a *converso* merchant of Solsona and the tutor of Francina, “daughter and heir of Dalmau Benet,” is presenting a legal document at the house of the notaries. There is no indication of what the said legal document entailed, but presumably it related to Tolrana/Francina's claim on her father's estate.

Without further evidence regarding the execution of Dalmau Benet's testament, it is difficult to determine how the various clauses were carried out. Was Tolrana removed as heir initially because she had not married her half-uncle? Did that then move Blanca, at her birth, to position of universal heir? Tolrana became a Christian in the month between her appeal to the king and her appearance as Francina in notarial records: what role did conversion have on her reinstatement as one of her father's universal heirs? Finally, was Tolrana/Francina's marriage to Asbert, which took place by June 1419, related to their individual roles as heirs to Dalmau's estate?

Alas, these questions are impossible to answer to any satisfaction. Notarial documents from March 1419 onward, as well as addenda to earlier records, indicate that both Blanca and Francina were considered universal heirs of their father, as their various tutors and procurators cancelled contracts, accepted payment for loans, and sold credit notes to others. All of these financial assets came from the estate of Dalmau Benet.⁹⁴ While we cannot be certain why Francina's status as heir changed, it would not have been the first time that inheritance rights were used as a push towards conversion. In 1417, Bellshom Falcó and his wife Regina converted from Judaism to Christianity, adopting the

⁹²Based on our examination of surviving notarial records, Ferrer Astruch appears to have converted to Christianity some time between 8 November 1418 and 2 January 1419.

⁹³AHG PN, Berenguer Ferrer Sasala G4: 73 (26 January 1419).

⁹⁴AHG PN, Antoni-Bernat Ferran, G7: 83 (5 September 1419); Berenguer Ferrer Sasala, G4: 63 (21 March 1413–addendum dated 4 September 1419); Joan Safont, G11: 42 (5 April 1419) and (6 April 1419).

names Bernat Falcó and Blanca. Of their five surviving children, only one son, David, refused to convert. In 1428, when Bernat Falcó wrote his will, he named three of his *converso* children as universal heirs, leaving out David and a married daughter who had already received her inheritance in the form of a dowry. Bernat did not disinherit David completely; instead, he left his son twenty-five pounds and offered an additional twenty-five pounds should David convert to Christianity.⁹⁵ That David did not take the offer, however, is apparent in his mother's will, drafted in 1437, which listed him still as a Jew.⁹⁶ Was Dalmau Benet using his will in a similar way to nudge his daughter to convert and marry his brother? All we can state definitively is that after her conversion, Francina was once again referred to as universal heir of her father in notarial records.

Tolrana's marriage to Asbert took place in the months after her conversion to Christianity and assumption of the name Francina.⁹⁷ Their union lessened somewhat the complexity of their inheritance rights, combining these tangled assets under the administration of Asbert. A year after their marriage, Francina named her husband as universal heir in her own testament, while also acknowledging her sister Blanca's rights to half of their father's estate. In the years and even decades after Francina's death in the fall of 1420, Asbert appeared frequently in the notarial records from Girona, particularly in addenda to documents originally involving Dalmau Benet as a Jew. Scrawled in almost indecipherable script, these brief additions demonstrate the lengths to which Asbert upheld the rights he had inherited from his first wife Francina to her father's property. Alongside Asbert's claims are those of Blanca's tutors during her minority, equally insuring that her legal rights were protected.

Explaining the overlapping and often confusing inheritance rights held by various members of the Benet family is important because the conversions of Tolrana and her future husband seem closely linked to economic concerns. As one of the wealthiest Jewish families in Girona, they faced increasing fiscal pressures as the community shrank in the years after the Disputation of Tortosa while royal demands – and papal interventions – grew. When Tolrana came to the king requesting assistance in February 1419, she indicated that “some Jews” were preventing her from seeking conversion. These Jews were her guardians, leaders of the *aljama* and members of her family, concerned about the consequences of her conversion on the solvency of the community. As noted above, the numerous conversions that took place in the years after the Disputation of Tortosa intensified pressures on the remaining Jews, who then had to shoulder the burden of taxation. This situation was especially dire as many of these conversions, like that of Dalmau Benet, came from Girona's leading Jewish families.⁹⁸ In this light, it is important to consider Tolrana's decision to convert as part of the ordinary efforts at survival that many Jews faced during this difficult time in Girona. In the early fifteenth century, the taxes that so burdened Jews were removed after conversion. Francina and

⁹⁵AHG PN, Berenguer Ferrer Sasala, G4: 61 (5 October 1428), f. 233v-234v.

⁹⁶AHG PN, Berenguer Ferrer Sasala, G4: 201 (17 April 1437), f. 50v-51v.

⁹⁷Tolrana appears to have converted in February 1419. In March 1419, she was named as a minor convert under the guardianship of Lluís de Cardona. The first mention of Asbert and Francina as husband and wife in the notarial archives of Girona comes from 27 August 1419 in relation to a credit note donated by Francina to her husband, a donation that had occurred on 22 June 1419 in the city of Barcelona. Their marriage therefore must have taken place between April and June.

⁹⁸These included male and female members of the Falcó, Mercadell, Alfaquim, and Gracià families, the son of Rabbi Bonas-truch Desmaestre, both sons of Bonsenyor Samuel, and the brothers Bernat and Guillem Vidal, among others.

Asbert's marriage thus allowed the Benet family to consolidate their wealth and ensured its survival for the next generations.

For both Tolranas in this tale, the complexities of marriage, divorce, and inheritance played into their decision-making regarding conversion. Yet Lynn Thomas reminds us that, for women in the past, we must consider the "entanglement of social and political structures with personal motivations and desires" when assessing their agency to make life choices.⁹⁹ Conversion of a spouse could destroy marriages and break families apart, drawing attention from both Jewish and Christian authorities. In early thirteenth-century Barcelona, Rabbi Solomon ibn Adret (Rashba) told Jewish wives of converts to "run away from their husbands 'as one runs away from a snake'," and in late medieval Girona, the bishop and local inquisitors pressured converts to bring their wives into the folds of the Church.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, we have evidence from the 1420s of local inquisitors attempting to prosecute converts whose wives and children remained Jewish.¹⁰¹

Grasping the determinations that underlay the choices of each Tolrana to resist or welcome conversion to Christianity is challenging, given the nature of the surviving evidence. While notarial records and royal letters can provide us with a window into their lives, highlighting their agency, such documents are also frustratingly opaque. We can see that these women were embedded in religious, social, and familial communities, and it is clear that their ability to act within and between those communities was shaped by multiple factors, above all religious identity and gender. An exploration of concrete examples like the two Tolranas – along with Constança, Regina, Blanca, and others – as part of an analysis of their larger context, offers a rare glimpse at answers to important questions about Jewish life, *converso* communities, and the capacity for choice in late medieval Girona.

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⁹⁹Thomas, "Historicizing Agency," 330.

¹⁰⁰Tartakoff, *Between Christian and Jew*, 113.

¹⁰¹AHG PN, Berenguer Ferrer Sasala, G4: 81 (3 December 1420), n/f.

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