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PART 3: JEWISH RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS by Samuel D. Gruber

Jewish communities in Europe during the Medieval and Early Modern period were generally restricted in the area in which they were allowed to reside, and in the number, type and size of buildings they were allowed to erect (see also AME 1, 391-3 for the period before 1200).

The exact rules — and the frequency with which exceptions were granted to existing laws, regulations and traditions — were dependent upon the precise circumstances of different localities and at different times. There has been little systematic excavation of former Jewish quarters to confirm or adjust the accepted views of restrictive Jewish life proffered by the documentary evidence. That evidence, however, is mostly in the form of official proclamations, edicts and statutes that may overstate the case.

Hebrew sources, especially the responsa literature (written rabbinic responses to queries about the application of Jewish law), as well as notarial documents and court records, suggest a more fluid situation, as well as areas that might in time be clarified by more attentive and focused archaeological investigation (Mann, 2000).

Non-Jewish documents also indicate areas of cultural interaction between Jews and Christians. Documents reveal that Jews engaged in different commercial and communal activities, amongst themselves and in contact with the wider world. Archaeological evidence, however, is mostly silent on medieval Jewish life except for religious behaviour. This reflects the fact that most cultural material of Jews is indistinguishable from that of Christians. Preconceptions and expectations of archaeologists is also a contributing factor. Most Jewish sites are found accidentally, so only sites already associated with Jews (through a document or a toponym) or that show clear Jewish attributes such as Hebrew inscriptions or Jewish symbols have been identified as Jewish.

Jewish houses, businesses and other structures and spaces may not, however, have had distinct Jewish characteristics that have survived in the archaeological record; we may assume that many other sites might also be described in some way as Jewish. Only in a few places, such as London, have archivists and archaeologists employed systematic mapping techniques to associate specific Jewish owners with specific properties (Hillaby, 1992). Such linkage alerts archaeologists, especially those involved in salvage excavation, of the possibility of a "Jewish connection," to help interpret finds. In a few places, such as Rouen, France, where a Jewish presence was accidentally revealed in the 1980s, excavations are being deliberately planned to investigate sites known from documents to have been within the Jewish quarter and to have seen extensive Jewish occupation.

Buildings used for uniquely Jewish activities, especially religious or ritual activities, are the ones most often identified as Jewish, and these seem to be the buildings that are most common and that have best survived. Remains of synagogues and ritual baths (mikva'ot) have been identified at scores of sites across Europe (Wamers and Backhaus, 2004). On the other hand, while we know that there were Jewish owned shops, taverns, mills, bakeries, slaughter-houses, and other types of structures which served the same communities that used the synagogues and ritual baths, few of these have been positively identified (Metzger 1982; Toaff 1998).
Synagogues

Jewish communities were established throughout Europe in the Early Middle Ages. Hundreds of towns and cities had small Jewish populations, but few had purpose-built synagogues. There is no required form for a synagogue. The Hebrew term *Beth ha-Knesset* means “house of meeting,” and the Greek-derived *synagogue* means the same (Gruber, 1999). More important is the requirement for certain forms of community prayer – the presence of ten men over the age of thirteen. Any place in which they meet for prayer can be a synagogue, and most likely many early Jewish communities adapted pre-existing spaces for such use. The key architectural elements defining a synagogue are the *Arón ha Kodesh* or Holy Ark, usually some type of cabinet, either built in or free standing, in which the scrolls are the Torah are kept, and the *bimah*, a platform from which the Torah is read at set times to the congregation. These elements were essential, other parts of the synagogue including a place for women, a place for ablutions, special types of seating, and various liturgical and ceremonial objects, varied over time and from place to place (Fig 11.22).

Built-in perimeter seating might indicate a synagogue, but also could be evidence of some other type of meeting hall. For example, interpretation of an excavated room in Guildford, England, first thought to be a synagogue remains unclear (Alexander, 1997). Discovery of the foundation of a *bimah* (as in Lorca, Spain), usually in the centre of the hall, or the evidence of an Ark niche or small room on the wall facing Jerusalem (in Europe, the East or southeast wall), are usually good evidence of synagogue use.

Prohibitions against building new synagogues were intermittently in force throughout Christian Europe from as early as the fourth century. Restrictions on synagogues can be found in most medieval law codes. Still, some new synagogues were erected, but most were small in size, discreet in location, and susceptible to sudden closure by zealous Christian authorities. For most of the Middle Ages the most substantial synagogues were in Spain, Sicily (Bucaria, 1998) and Southern Italy, and in Central Europe (Paulus, 2007).

**Fig 11.22** Schematic plan of a synagogue (western Sephardi), showing components. The *tebáh* (*bimah*) is situated near the western wall, the *Hekhal* (Ark) at the eastern wall, and the pews face the central axis. (M. Carver).
Medieval synagogues were often located in or near the house or business of the richest Jews. Scant physical traces survive since Jews were so often expelled from medieval centres, and the defining characteristics of these synagogues were their furnishings, now long gone. In Italy, a fine stone townhouse in the medieval Italian town of Sermoneta may have been a synagogue, as may the example in the Vicolo dell Atleta, Rome (Fig 11.23). Worshippers here would have met on the piano nobile, in a large well-lit room on the first floor (above ground level) – a space traditional reserved for the finest as rooms for the master of the house (Tetro, 1977). House synagogues of this type were once quite common, and the form continued in Europe through the eighteenth century, and has been revived in modern times with new variations.
More public and lavish medieval “hall” type synagogues existed, including two former synagogues in the southern Italian town of Trani, converted to use churches in the fifteenth century (Cassuto, 1980), and fragments of two synagogues in Sopron (Hungary) and two in Budapest. Examples of this type of synagogue can also be seen in the fifteenth century woodcuts published by the anti-Jewish apostate Johannes Pfefferkorn. The thirteenth century synagogue of Sopron has been partially reconstructed, as part of an archaeological process that extracted the earliest building elements from the later additions. It is set back from the street through a passageway between two houses. One enters the synagogue through a narrow corridor, and the sanctuary floor is three steps lower than the vestibule. The sanctuary was a vaulted space with the small Ark set permanently into the east wall and decorated with carved stone work. There would once have been a wooden door to the Ark which would lock in order to secure the Torah scrolls stored within, as these were both the most sacred and most expensive religious items in the building. The women’s prayer room had a separate entrance on the south. On the synagogue plot were other structures, including a caretaker’s house, a narrow building built toward the end of the fourteenth century to house travellers or the sick, and a mikveh (Ferenc, 1994).

In towns with larger Jewish populations and greater resources architecturally more ambitious synagogues were erected (Paulus, 2007). Among these are a series of double-nave structures built across Central Europe beginning in the twelfth century. The synagogues at Worms (Germany) and Prague (Czech Republic) are the most impressive surviving examples, but others have been excavated at Budapest (Hungary), Regensburg (Germany) and Vienna (Austria). The Worms synagogue consists of several sections built at different periods, beginning in 1170, when they rebuilt the building dating from 1034. The men’s hall (1175) was divided by two columns on the east-west axis into parallel aisles of equal size. The ark stood at the east end; the bimah was between the columns. A women’s annex, built at right angles to the men’s section on the north side, was added in 1213. The structure was destroyed in the Second World War, but has been rebuilt, using mostly original material (Böcher, 2001).

The oldest synagogue in continuous use is Prague’s Altnsheul (Old-New Synagogue), built in the late thirteenth century. The Altnsheul also has a double-nave plan, with two tall octagonal piers. The bimah is between the piers; its wrought iron enclosure with pointed arches probably dates from the fifteenth century. The synagogue is surrounded by a number of low annexes added throughout its history. The women’s section in the west annex, dated 1732, was later extended to the north side. Narrow windows about three feet above the floor level connect the women’s annexes with the main hall (Krinsky, 1985).

The twin-nave plan was probably adopted because it was commonly used in less “church-like” structures such as friaries, refectories, dormitories, and chapter houses of convents in Central Europe. A shortcoming of the twin-nave plan is that the eastern column blocked a head-on view of the Ark. This was minimized, by situating the entrance at an angle to the Ark – so some sight lines were clear. With benches around the interior perimeter much of the activity took place around the bimah, rather than along a linear axis between bimah and Ark.
In medieval Spain a separate tradition developed more dependent upon eastern Jewish authorities and Muslim cultural influences in the creation of a liturgical, linguistic and artistic tradition. There were hundreds of synagogues in Spain and Portugal before the final expulsion of Jews from Iberia at the end of the fifteenth century (Cantera y Burgos, 1984; Assis, 1992). In Toledo alone there were at least nine synagogues and five midrashim (small chapels). Two important synagogues from this period still survive. The older was originally the Great Synagogue, now commonly known as Santa Maria la Blanca after the church into which it was transformed after the expulsion in 1492. The exterior is modest, but inside four rows of 32 octagonal piers support horseshoe arches to create an impressive free-flowing open space. Elaborate stucco ornament in the clerestory windows gives a semblance of original decorative opulence. The Aron ha-Kodesh is now gone, but was once an irregularly shaped room entered from the end of the central nave. There is no women’s section or gallery, and it is not clear which spaces were open to women. A similar synagogue existed in Segovia and is now a church.

The private synagogue of fourteenth century Courtier Samuel HaLevi Abulafia was of a very different type. It was joined to HaLevi’s palace on the east, and the large rectangular interior has rich stucco decoration with Hebrew inscriptions encircling the nave just below the high and richly decorated ceiling. Some inscriptions praise King Pedro I, HaLevi’s patron, and others hail Abulafia as "prince among the princes of the tribe of Levi." A spacious gallery on the north side was possibly for women. A gallery along the west wall may have been the choir loft. The east wall is covered with decorative panels surrounding three arches which led to a small chamber (known through recent excavation) that served as the Ark (Palomera Plaza et al, 1992).

The synagogue and the surrounding eleven houses of the small hilltown of Lorca (Murcia) comprise one of the most impressive Jewish archaeological finds. The houses contained distinctly Jewish features, including ceramic Hanukah oil lamps. The synagogue included original architectural and decorative features and fragments of more than 50 glass hanging lamps – previously only known from manuscript illuminations and later similar types from North Africa. The Jewish quarter was below the fortified castle walls; the houses arranged in order to make best use of the uneven terrain. They vary in size, and most include small patios, elevated spare rooms, spaces with brick benches built against the walls (in an arrangement similar to synagogue), storage areas for large built-in ceramic jars, cabinets, cupboards, kitchens, and in at least one case, a built-in bathroom. Together, the excavated houses and the many artefacts found within them provide the most comprehensive view of Jewish domestic space ever discovered. The archaeological site in Lorca is exceptional because it lay essentially undisturbed for so many centuries, allowing one of the largest open-air excavations of any (non-cemetery) Jewish site in Europe.

The synagogue is a substantial rectangular structure set into and projecting from the hillside, facing northeast. Its short entrance end consists of a vestibule room entered from the side at the southwest corner of the building. A separate entrance and small room on the southeast probably led to a second story room above the vestibule that was reserved for women. Within the vestibule are the remains of a water source for ablutions, and an entrance into the main sanctuary on axis with the tevah and Aron ha Kodesh. The
Aron ha Kodesh wall, at the opposite end was built almost entirely above ground and is thus mostly destroyed. Still, large traces of the decoration of the Aron have been found in excavation including blue and white glazed pavement tiles in situ, and extensive decorative plasterwork fallen from the walls. There are significant traces of the masonry base of the tevah, situated in the centre of the sanctuary, as well as masonry benches built around three sides of the interior (Carrillo & González Ballesteros, 2009).

Schools

Jewish schools or academies existed in many medieval Jewish centres. There were also scriptoria where Torah scrolls and religious manuscripts were produced; these may have been attached to schools. Only one building has been excavated that is likely to have been one of these important institutions. Discovery in 1976 of a monumental Jewish building in Rouen, France (Ch 10, p 440), sparked intense debate as to its original function, and eventually led to a more attention to the history and contribution of Jews to the history and topography of that city, and to Normandy as a whole. The early twelfth-century Romanesque style building was beneath the courtyard of the Palace of Justice, on the ancient Rue aux Juifs. At first it was inferred by archaeologists that it was a medieval synagogue. Professor Norman Golb, determined, however, that the authentic monumental synagogue was located on the other south side of the Street of the Jews, approximately 75 metres west of the newly discovered building. Golb identified the new building as the “School of the Jews” – a rabbinic academy (Golb, 1998).

Baths: mikva’ot

The earliest documentary evidence of a medieval mikveh in the European west is from Rome (Italy), where poet and author Nathan ben Yehiel, relates that he built a ritual bath in 1028 – and a synagogue twelve years later. The mikveh is used for the ritual immersion and cleansing by women after menstruation or childbirth, and also for various other purification rituals. Because of their frequent below-ground location, mikva’ot (plural of mikveh) are frequently revealed by archaeology, or when their location is suspected, they are more easier excavated than other Jewish building types (Heuburger, 1992). Mikva’ot have been discovered in Sicily (Scandaliato & Mulè, 2002) but to date, most have been found north of the Alps.

Archaeology, especially from German-speaking lands informs us of two primary types of mikva’ot; monumental and cellar. Monumental mikva’ot offer remarkable evidence of the architectural resources available to Jews. All were located within the Jüdenhof (Jewish court), close by the synagogue, since women traveling to a mikveh needed a safe environment. Elsewhere smaller private mikva’ot have been discovered in the basements of houses. Two such likely examples a have been excavated in London (England) (Blair, I. et al, 2002).

At Speyer the stone work is similar to the part of the cathedral completed in 1109 (Stein, 1978) (Fig 11.24). These mikva’ot are also remarkable for their depth to water
level, (up to 25m), and for their staircases, often comprised of 30 to 40 steps. Monumental mikvā'ot with single shafts for air and light, with access by a staircase down four sides were common. The Cologne mikvot, dated to no later than the Carolingian period when it suffered earthquake damage, may be the earliest (Schütte, 2004). Other single-shaft mikvā'ot are at Friedberg in Hesse (ca. 1260) and Andernach on the Rhine (c. 1300). A second, mikveh type, such as Speyer (ca. 1110), Worms (ca. 1185-86) and Offenburg in Baden (not securely dated) had a vertical shaft for light and air and a diagonal one for access. Both types had large, square pools with steps continuing below water level. Offenburg had an unusual circular pool in the centre of a square chamber. Mikvā'ot also have been discovered in France and in Catalonia.

In the past decade attention has begun to shift from the monumental mikvā'ot to the simpler, cellar mikvā'ot which are both closer to those found in Second Temple and Roman Israel, and may also have been more common in the Middle Ages and Early Modern period. An example at Würzburg may date to the early twelfth century and small mikvā'ot have also been discovered at Erfurt, Rothenburg, Sondershausen (Thuringia), and Nuremberg. These usually had barrel-vaulted chambers with small rectangular stone or rock-cut pools with access to the water by stone steps. In Ciudad Real (Spain) in 1483 evidence of private mikvā'ot in homes was presented to the Inquisition as evidence against Jews who were forced to convert to Christianity but who maintained Jewish customs. It is expected that more urban archaeology in Spain will reveal evidence of domestic mikvā'ot.

![Jewish ritual bath (mikveh) in Speyer, first mentioned in the year 1128. The bath was forgotten and built over, and only recently re-discovered and made accessible to the public (GNU Free documentation License).](image-url)