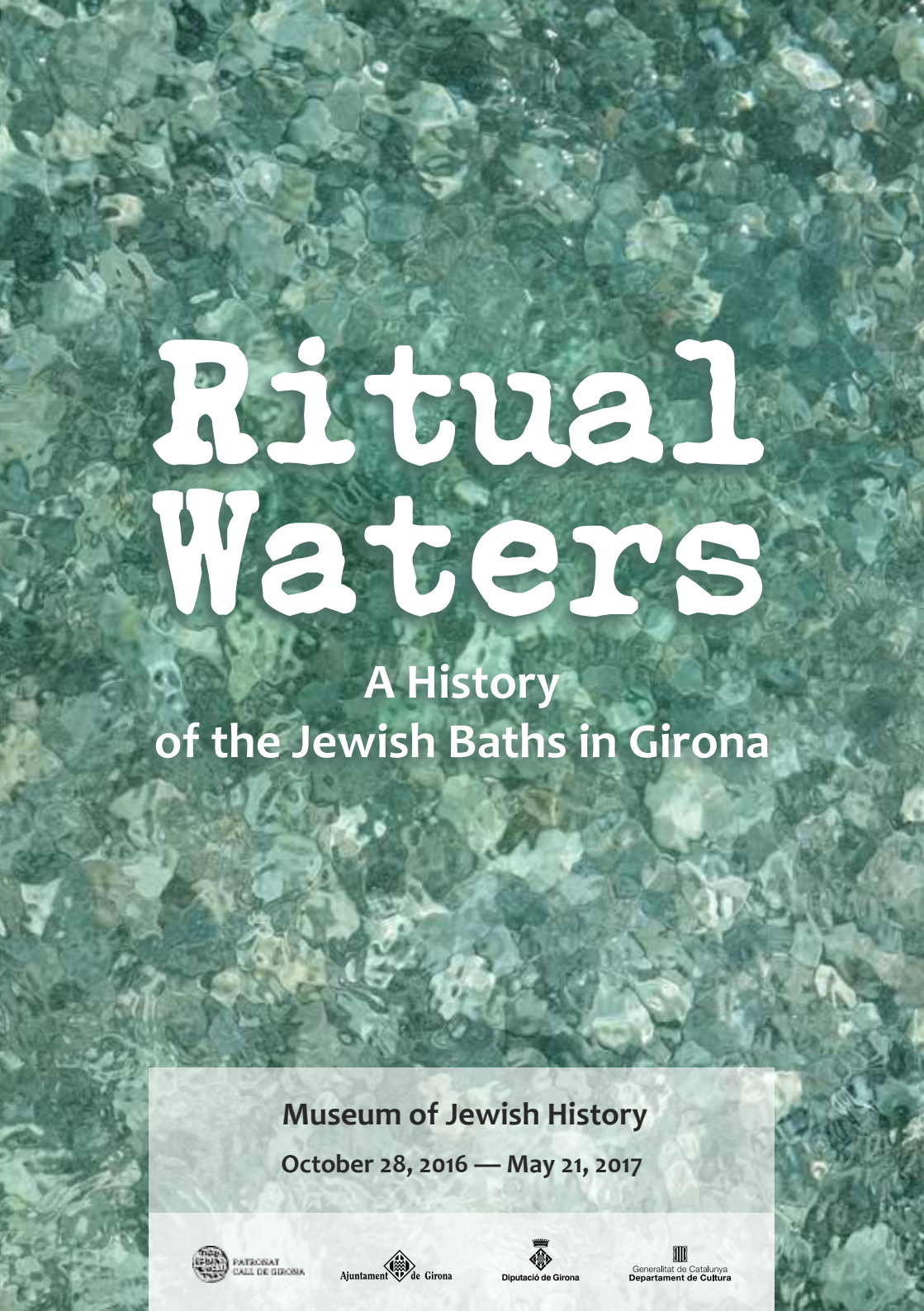


Ritual Waters

A History of the Jewish Baths in Girona

Museum of Jewish History

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PATRONAT CALL DE GIRONA
Ajuntament de Girona
Diputació de Girona
Generalitat de Catalunya
Departament de Cultura



Ritual Waters
A History of the Jewish Baths in Girona

Water was an element with ritual purifying power for the two cultures –Christian and Jewish– that coexisted in medieval Girona, but in each case, this belief had a different orientation.

A person joined the Christian Church with holy water, which sealed the sacrament of baptism. This was an individual, spiritual act, shared by men and women, which was valid for a lifetime.

In Judaism, water was necessary for the ritual purification that, according to Mosaic law, was necessary under certain circumstances, especially at certain times in the female life cycle. For this reason, this prescription was imposed with greater rigor upon women, for whom immersion was a rite repeated every month. Its function was to sanctify the physical actions of one's life, especially sexual relations, which always took place within the bonds of marriage and with a view towards procreation. Ritual purification distinguished Jewish women from Christian women and had an evident connotation of otherness and difference. Immersion took place in the ***mikveh*** (literally, "living water"), which was normally located in the synagogue complex.

This exhibition presents the history of the use of water as a purifying element in Jewish Girona: what ritual baths were, and how they were made, where the city's *mikvaot* were located, and what remains of all those spaces where, thanks to the fulfilment of the ritual prescribed by the law of Moses, the water returned lost purity and provided for a recovery of the harmony of life.

The Importance of the *Mikveh*

Blessed art Thou, O Lord, Our God, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments and has commanded us concerning immersion. (*Siddur, Tevilah*)

The *mikveh* or purification bath was an absolutely indispensable location for Jewish life in the *calls* (Jewish quarters); it was even more important than the synagogue itself. From the beginnings of Judaism, the religious prescription regarding periodic ritual immersion was extended to both men and women, but it was women who, because of physical and biological conditions, regularly went through periods of an impurity that was eliminated with the purifying waters of the *mikveh*. In this environment, purity and fertility went hand-in-hand. In the life of the Girona Jewish community, the *mikveh* ritual guaranteed the holiness of conception, and this, in turn, ensured fulfilment of the Biblical commandment: "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and master it."

The miracle of the ritual bath, according to Hamburg Miscellanea (Mainz, 1428-1434)
Staats-und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg, Hebrew codex 37, folio 79v





The ritual

The purification ritual implies the total immersion of the body, which must be naked, clean, and free from any element that prevents the circulation of water. The immersion must be conducted three times in a row, in accordance with a ceremony called *tevilah* (immersion). The water must be "living," originating in a natural source (river, rain, underground current...), and in any case, cannot be manipulated or poured artificially, since that invalidates the immersion.

Not only people, but also objects benefit from the purifying effect of the water. Before being used for the preparation of any meal, all metal or glass utensils purchased from non-Jews must be submerged in the *mikveh*.

The purification of domestic vessels, according to the Hispano-Moresque Haggadah (Castile, ca. 1300)
British Library, manuscript Or. 2.737, folio 90r

Like Besalú and Montpellier

Among the few medieval *mikvaot* still visible today in Europe, two stand out because they are well preserved, strongly evocative, and geographically and culturally close to Girona: the Jewish ritual baths of Besalú and Montpellier. This proximity leads one to believe that these *mikvaot* would bear a great deal of resemblance to those of our city.



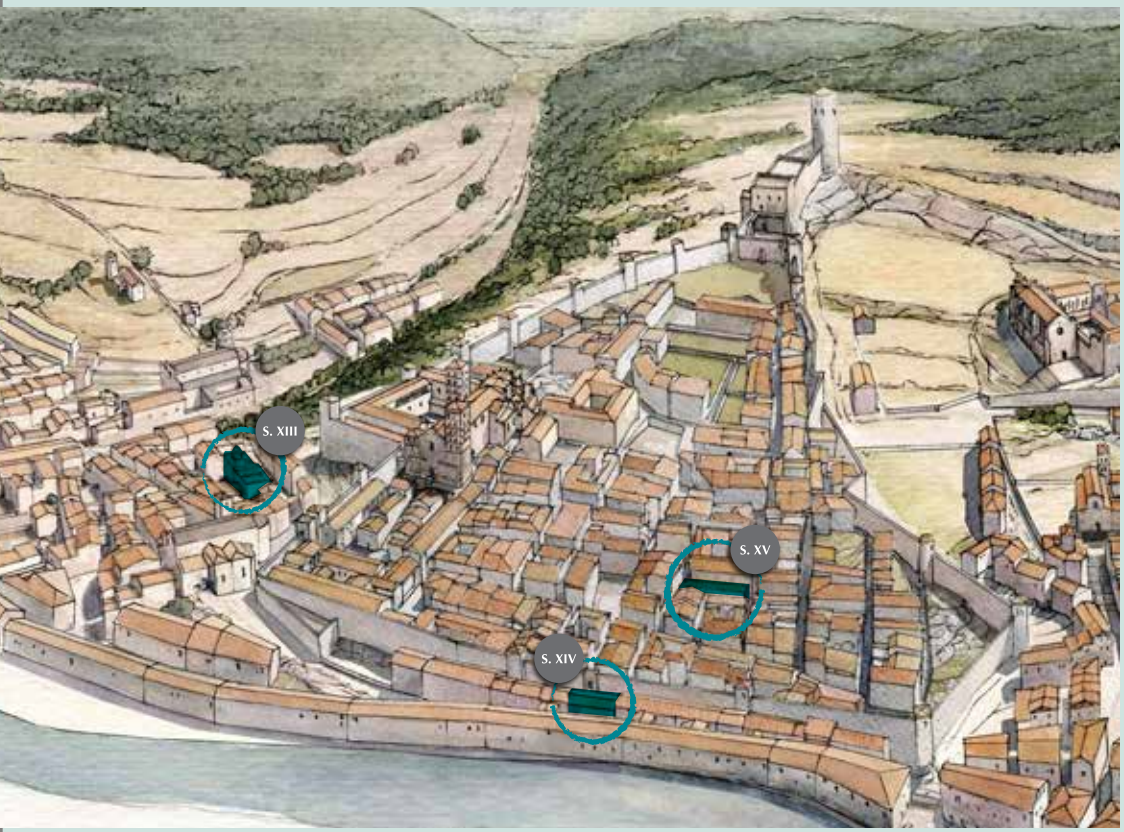


***Mikvaot* from Besalú and Montpellier (13th century)**
Photos: Josep M. Oliveras

The Different *Mikvaot* of Medieval Girona

domo balneorum aliame iudeorum Gerunde
the bathhouse of the Jewish *aljama* (community) of Girona

Purification through a ritual bath as described in the Law of Moses was a practice of the Girona Jewish community during its entire existence throughout the Middle Ages. Almost always within the *call*, the space set aside for the *mikveh* varied depending where the community was located, especially after the prohibitions and attacks the community was subjected to by the Christian powers.



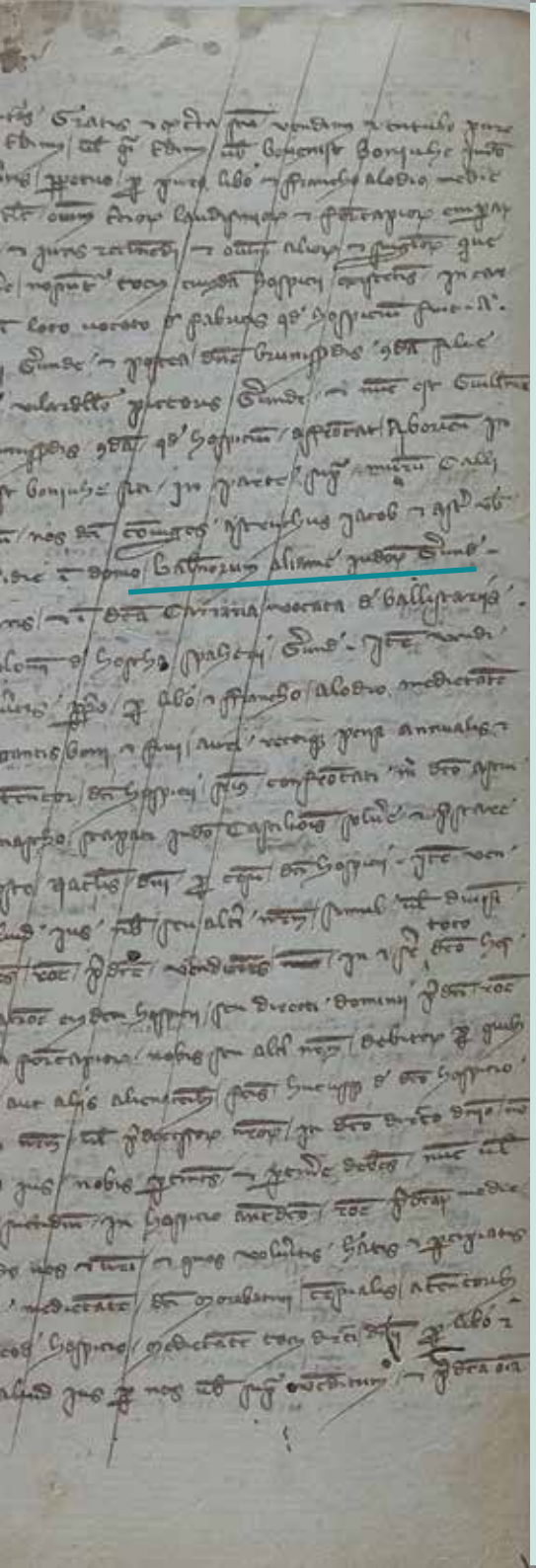
Ritual baths in medieval Girona
Rendering: Jordi Sagrera

A *Mikveh* Outside the *Call*

The oldest documented *mikveh* in Girona dates back to the 13th century. It was within the public bath area (what are today known as the "Arab Baths"), in a room rented by the Jewish community for the express purpose of being used as a ritual bath or *mikveh*. So specified a *responsum* by Rabbi Salomó ben Adret of Barcelona, the Rashba, addressed to Jewish scholars in Girona at the end of the 13th century. The reasons for the unusual use of a public space as a place for the performance of a Jewish ritual most certainly have to do with the destruction of the *call* by the Almogavars in 1285. After that, the Jewish community had to make do without an adequate and suitable *mikveh*, and, while waiting to be able to reconstruct it together with the synagogue, it opted to lease a room within the area of the city's public baths.



Public baths in medieval Girona, known as "Arab Baths"
Photo: Gironès County Council



A *Mikveh* next to the Onyar River

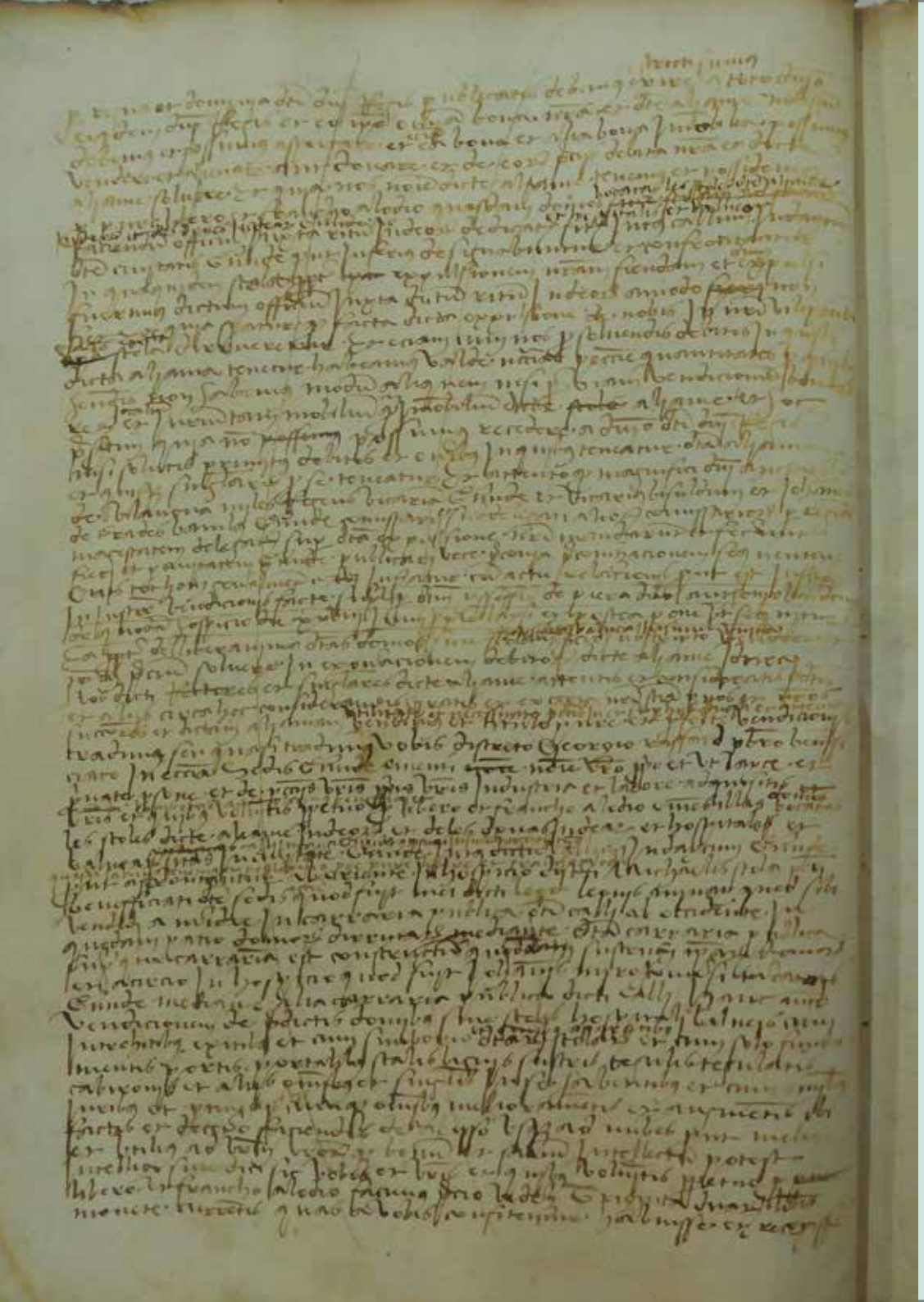
In the 14th century, the Jewish community of Girona attained demographic and social splendour, with nearly 800 persons. The *call* reached outwards on both sides of what is today La Força Street, and it had a fairly large synagogue, with different rooms and compartments. It has been determined that the *mikveh* of the time was located just next to the Ballesteries wall, and all indications are that it was fed with water from the Onyar River. That was the most spacious and beautiful ritual bath in the entire history of Jewish Girona. Some limited physical remains were left, a few steps that make it possible to imagine the descent down to the purifying pool. Its trail, however, can be perfectly traced thanks to archival documents describing its sale, brought about by the 1492 expulsion.

Sale of a house on Ballesteries street, to the north of the Girona Jewish community bathhouse
La Garrotxa Regional Archive, Notarial Documents, Besalú, Pere de Mallorques (1343-1344), volume 62, folios 68r-70r

A *Mikveh* inside the Museum

In the 15th century, the situation of the Jewish community changed drastically. The *call* was attacked in the summer of 1391, and there was massive destruction. In 1415, as a result of the Disputation of Tortosa, the synagogue was closed. Reopened in 1416 by order of Queen Mary, it was closed once again, this time for good, in 1420. After that closure, there was no proper place to carry out the purification ritual, until 1434, when the community acquired some land, on which it constructed a new synagogue, with all the necessary elements and space for community life. At that location inside the *call*, there already was a cistern, or perhaps some very old wells that might have provided the community with the pure water it needed to comply with the *mikveh* ritual. That spot is now occupied by the patio of the Bonastruc ça Porta Center, the site of the Museum of Jewish History.

Girona *mikveh* (15th century)
Photo: Josep M. Oliveras



Girona's Last *Mikveh*

illas domos vocatas* les scoles *dicte aliame iudeorum et* de les donas *iudearum et hospitales et balnearum in calli iudaiyci Gerunde constituto insimul contiguas
those contiguous houses, called Schools of the *aljama* of Jews and Jewesses, and the Hospitals and Baths, in the area established as the Jewish quarter of Girona

The 1492 Expulsion Decree forced the Jewish communities to leave and divest themselves of their individual and communal property. In July of that fateful year, the Jews of Girona sold the synagogue, including all its buildings and rooms, the most salient of which was the *mikveh*. The notarial registries of the successive sales that were recorded in the years immediately after 1492 allow us to pinpoint its location within the *call* and to list the different spaces that comprised it: the men's school, the women's school, the hospital and the ritual bath. Documentation and archaeology have demonstrated that this complex was situated to the northeast of today's Bonastruc ça Porta Center, abutting Sant Llorenç Street to the north, the synagogue patio to the south, other synagogue rooms to the west, and the house of Leon Aninai, the secretary and *regidor* (community leader) of the Girona *aljama*.

Sale of the Girona synagogue complex (July 9, 1492)
Girona Historical Archive, Notarial Documents, Girona-8, Pere Escuder, volume 93, folio 141v
Facsimile



The Ritual is Forgotten

The study of the documentation and archaeological explorations have made it possible to identify the *mikveh* in a space that for many years had been preserved under the appearance of a water tank. What had been the last *mikveh* in Girona was dismantled at the beginning of the 16th century. The pool was reconverted into a water tank. With the 1492 expulsion decree, the Jewish religion had been prohibited forever and a *mikveh* was no longer necessary, but a supply of drinking water continued to be a vital necessity for the people who moved into the area of the former Jewish quarter. The use of water as a purifying element, and the *mikveh*, where the immersion took place, were forgotten for centuries.

The archaeological space of the Girona *mikveh*
Museum of Jewish History
Photo: Josep M. Oliveras

Theoretical reconstruction of the ritual bath



Restored floor plan of the ritual bath

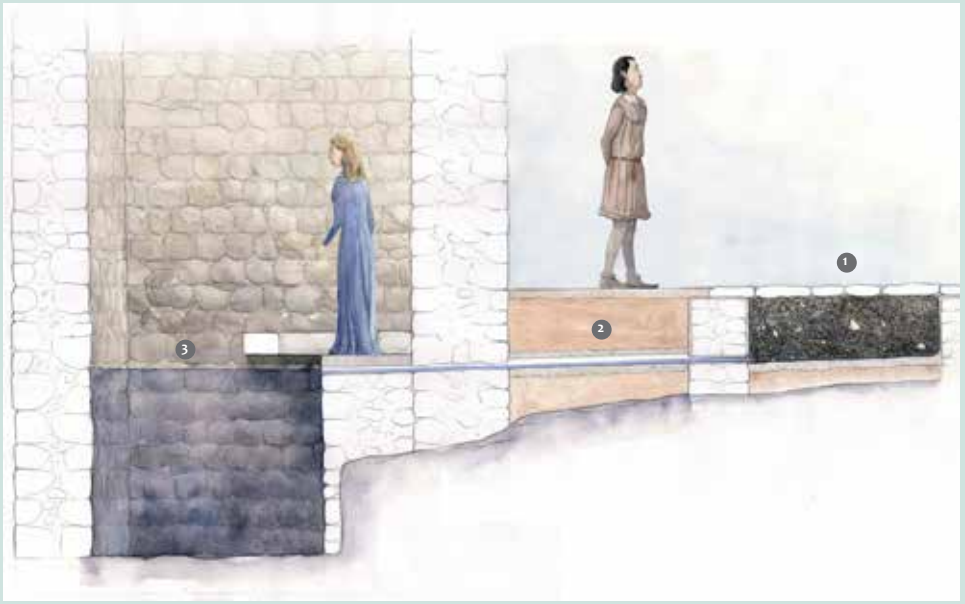
1. Door
2. Hall
3. Changing room
4. Pool
5. Threshold
6. Landing
7. Collecting tank



Reconstruction and floor of the Girona *mikveh*
Rendering: Jordi Sagrera

The Operation of the *Mikveh*

All indications are that the ritual bath was located on the ground floor of the synagogue. The structures that have been excavated make up a closed space around a ritual pool that was square in shape. There was a water collecting trough that accumulated rainwater, which was filtered in order to remove impurities, and later transported to the *mikveh*. The threshold and the beginnings of the doorposts for the door that provided access to the bath remain. There was a gradual incline leading down to the purifying water, thanks to a stone slab landing that can still be seen, embedded in the southern wall.



1. Collecting tank
2. Conducting
3. Pool

The path the water followed towards the Girona *mikveh*
Rendering: Jordi Sagrera

Archaeology Confirms It

During the excavations that opened up the *mikveh*, these ceramic fragments came to light in the Bonastruc ça Porta Center patio. According to Jewish law, such a material was always considered to be pure. These are simply the remains of domestic utensils that had been broken and rejected (green and manganese, Catalan and Valencian blues, mainly from Manises, all from the first third of the 15th century). They had been dumped intentionally into the rainwater collection trough as a filling material, and they aided in the filtration of the water, which was later channeled towards the immersion pool.

The remains of the 15th century *mikveh* are on the top floor of the Museum of Jewish History. Visit it!



Ceramic fragments from the excavations in the *mikveh* (1st third of the 15th century)
Generalitat de Catalunya. Archives, Libraries, Museums and Heritage Section

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