



Jewish cultural heritage
in the Region of Murcia

LORCA'S SYNAGOGUE AND JEWISH QUARTER



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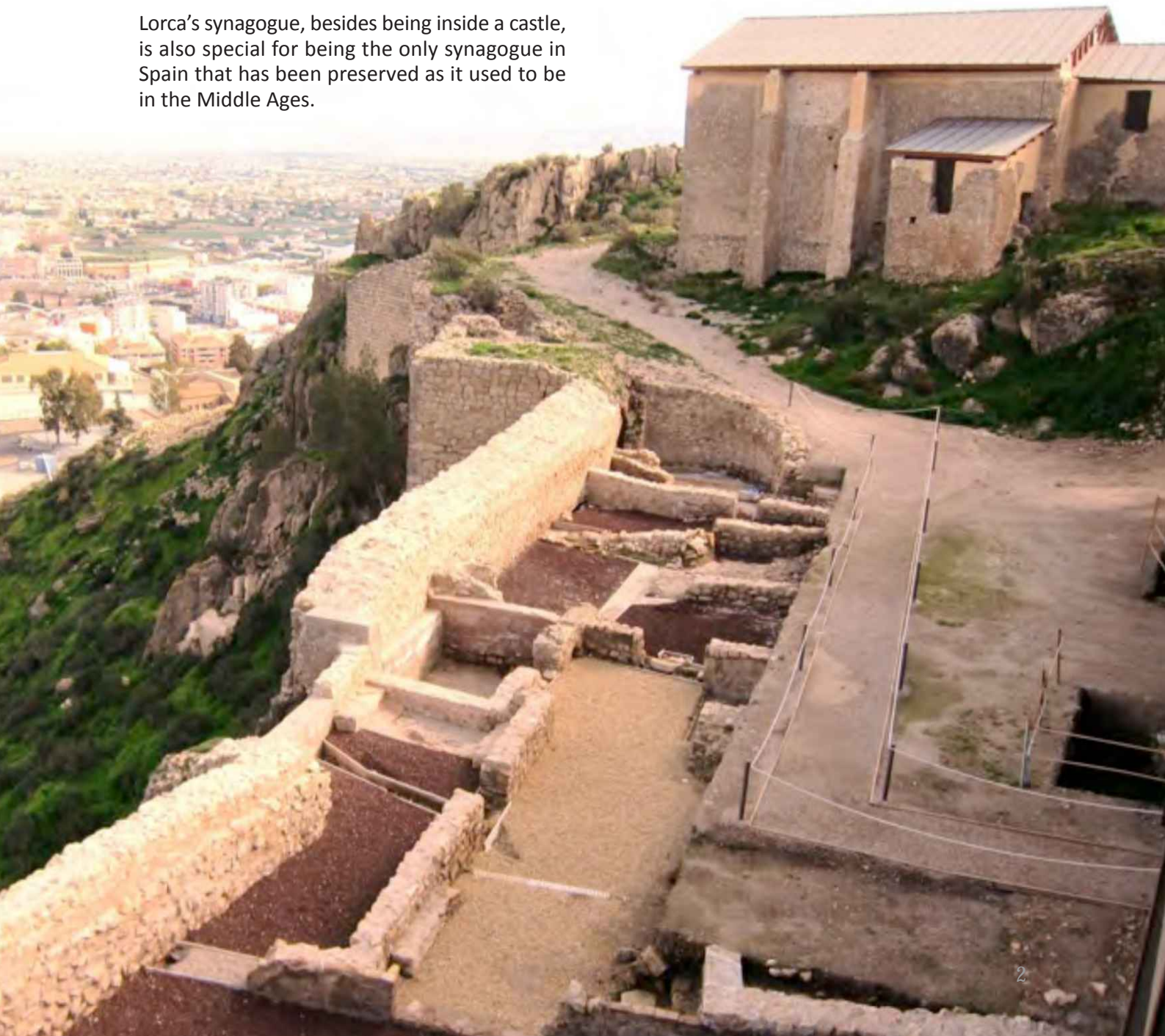
In 2003, thanks to the archaeological excavations carried out to build a Parador de Turismo in Lorca (Region of Murcia), the remains of an old Jewish quarter and a synagogue which dates back to the 15th century were discovered.

This was an outstanding discovery, since the synagogue has been well preserved and it provided important archaeological information which is useful to get to know better this kind of building.

Lorca's synagogue, besides being inside a castle, is also special for being the only synagogue in Spain that has been preserved as it used to be in the Middle Ages.

It never was a worship setting for other religions, and therefore became a sacred and pilgrimage place for Jews around the world.

The synagogue can already be visited; it will be used as a museum and as a religious place, allowing rites and religious ceremonies of the Jewish community to be celebrated there.

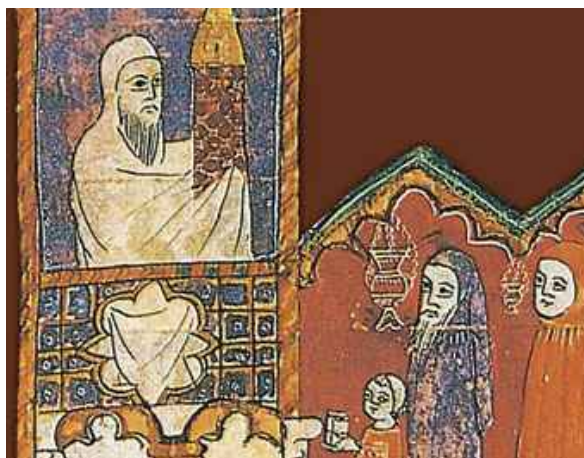


1 Historical Background Jews in the Region of Murcia

The origins of the Jewish presence in the Iberian Peninsula are really uncertain, although it is supposed that the civilisation of Tartessos already had trade relations with Israel during the times of king Solomon. However, the earliest evidence of a Jewish presence in the Iberian Peninsula date from Roman and Visigoth times, and the first relevant settlements have been recorded in Mediterranean cities.



Regarding the Region of Murcia, archaeological research provides indications of a Jewish presence on our shores: in the ancient city of Carthago-Nova, where the libertas were possibly Jewish, as well as in Águilas and Mazarrón, where clear iconographic examples which have been found confirm the presence of the Semitic culture in ancient times.



But it was not until ten years ago, with the discovery of the Jewish quarter in Lorca, that the evidence of documentary sources was confirmed: there were important Jewish communities in the Region of Murcia during the Middle Ages.

In the 12th century, the variety of borders and jurisdictions that characterised the Kingdom of Murcia certainly was a chance of survival for Jews fleeing from the persecutions of the caliphs from al-Ándalus and that found the area where resistance to Almohad fundamentalism was greatest in the peninsula's southeast.



A similar situation took place two centuries later, in 1391. Ferrán Martínez's anti-Semitic sermons aroused fanaticism in the mobs, that attacked the Jewish quarters and killed thousands of Jews in Sevilla, Castilla and Levante; Murcia, to which the king was grateful for its defence of the Jews, was an exception.

Thus, during the outbreak of violence, the Kingdom of Murcia became an area of protection for Spanish Judaism. The most remarkable aljamas were Lorca, Mula, Cartagena and Murcia, one of the biggest in Castilla at the beginning of the 15th century, having between 200 and 300 families and between 1000 and 1500 persons.

2 Historical Background Jews in Lorca

The first news of the establishment of a Jewish community in Lorca date from mid-13th century, under Christian rule, and refer to the conquest by the then Infante Alfonso (later King Alfonso X the Wise) and the repopulation and distribution of this territory.

There is no data as to show the date when the settlement occurred in the castle and if the Jews who lived there were stationed in the old fortress or if they came from a previous location and were then moved into the old fortress in the difficult years of persecution and bloodbath to facilitate protection.

In any case, the study of historical documents makes it possible to define two sectors of the city associated with the Jewish minority throughout the 15th century: a core where daily life of community members, religious acts and supply activities took place, and a sector where their trade activities were developed.

Some studies have made it possible to make an estimate of the Jewish population in Lorca at that time: a number ranging between 120 and 180 inhabitants in the last quarter of the 15th century.



Infographic reconstruction of Lorca's Jewish quarter

The roots of the Jewish settlement in Lorca extend along the 16th century under conversion, with powerful figures in every political and social activity, but a massive conversion of the population never took place.



Infographic reconstruction of Lorca's Synagogue inside

3 Context of Discoveries in Lorca

A bit more than a decade ago, the strong degradation processes that the structure of the Lorca Castle was suffering and the hill's delicate geological support put the rescue of this heritage gem at risk.



West sector of Lorca Castle

Therefore, and in order to preserve the archaeological wealth of the area and enhance its unquestionable symbolic value, the project 'Lorca Taller del Tiempo' was launched, with the participation of regional and local authorities and the cooperation of various companies and organisations. The intervention on the so-called 'Fortaleza del Sol' was mainly addressed from a tourist and cultural point of view, recovering a

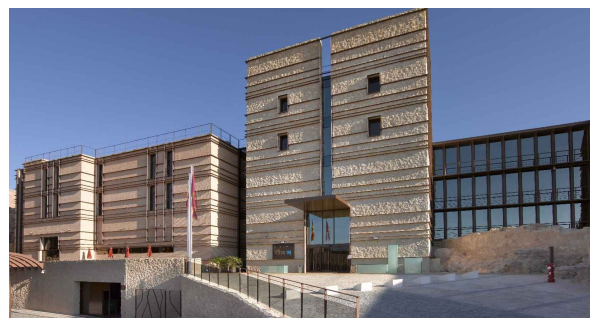


Main area of archaeological intervention

significant portion of the monument and opening it for tourist visits.

First, 'Lorca Taller del Tiempo' implemented an 'Evaluation Plan' that yielded some very important documentation and knowledge of the Lorca Castle set from a historical and archaeological point of view and generated a cultural and tourist product of undeniable importance as well as national and worldwide recognition.

Similarly, the Ministry of Industry, by means of Turespaña, showed interest in this monumental set, choosing it as the ideal setting to build a Parador aimed at boosting quality cultural tourism. The procedure of conditioning the environment and building the Parador brought an important archaeological activity that affected the whole area, leading to an extraordinary study with outstanding results: the location of the synagogue and the first urban remains of the Jewish quarter.



Lorca's Parador de Turismo

The set of restored and visited archaeological sites in the Parador area will be completed by those which may appear in the future. For this purpose, there is an ongoing project since 2009, that has been funded by the Lorca Tourism Promotion Plan and the Regional Ministry of Culture and Tourism, and launched the start of the process of excavation and recovery of the whole area to the east of the Parador.

This project, included in the 'Plan Director Parador – Fortaleza del Sol', has made it possible to establish a museum itinerary along the remains of the Jewish quarter (synagogue, house no. VII, Almohad remains, etc.) and through the Castle, recovering the parapet walk of the perimeter wall, a visit to the remains of interest, including San Clemente church, and exit through the 'Puerta del Pescado'.



Archaeological excavations

4 Lorca's Synagogue and Jewish Quarter Archaeological and Monumental Remains



Zenithal view of the Synagogue's remains

The archaeological activities in the area of the Parador de Turismo in Lorca have made it possible to get to know the houses of the Jewish quarter, a building for the confinement and slaughter of animals, private bathrooms and part of a possible public miqvé that used the structures of a bathroom from the Islamic period. The core of the Jewish quarter, which reached its greatest splendour between the 14th and 15th centuries, was the synagogue complex. The main entrance to the Jewish quarter from the outside of the castle was the opening in the north wall, known as the 'Puerta del Pescado'. The set has an exceptional value because, after the expulsion (15th century), it was abandoned and never again occupied as an urban area.

The structure of the district was divided into terraces, with a complex repertoire of types of housing that formed minor household units with 3 bedrooms, large houses covering an entire block, or homes adapted to the land which in some cases generated a semi-rock architecture.

Among the elements that characterise the material domestic culture of the Jewish quarter, the most numerous and characteristic ones are the janukkíot, related to the celebration of Janukká or the 'Festival of Lights' during the month of kislev.



Excavation detail

The floors are usually square or rectangular, sometimes forming central courtyards. There are above-ground bedrooms, and frequently there are attached baseboards, kitchens, stone water filters, cupboards, or ceramic containers embedded in the ground to be used as braziers.

With respect to Lorca's synagogue, it follows the models we know in the Diaspora, with a basilica floorplan, next to a set of home and community rooms.



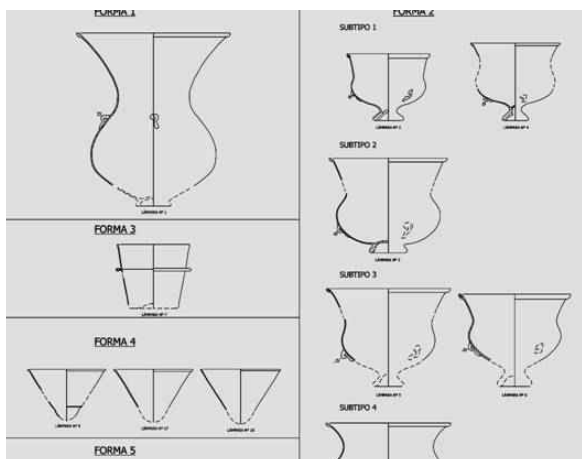
Synagogue inside at present





Synagogue's remains before reconstruction

The analysis shows us a building of a purely mudéjar style with two entrances open to a courtyard, one of which allows access to the hall, which houses the pool for ablutions before prayer. It is connected with the chapel, a meeting room surrounded by benches against the walls (safsalim), with a maximum capacity of seventy men, and which still keeps two main spots: the Hejal or Arón ha-qodesh and the Bimá or Tebá. The hejal, where they kept the Torah Scroll, is embedded in the northeast wall of the synagogue. It used to have a skirting board covered with tiles and crowned by a plaster trefoil arch, typical of late Hispanic Gothic. The other spot which stands out is the Tebá, located at the centre of the synagogue, creating a high place or platform as a pulpit. A gallery of women (matroneum), on an upper floor, was accessed by the third entrance.



Lamps of Lorca's Synagogue

A significant fact is the discovery of multiple glass fragments which have made it possible to reconstruct twenty lamps and define thirty more lamps with which the building used to be lighted. This set of lamps represents the oldest and most varied series of such glass objects linked to a synagogue we know until today.

More glass lamps are now preserved in Lorca than throughout Europe during the Middle Ages.

Another important aspect of the synagogue is its plasterwork; it has been divided into 18 sets. Although essentially mudéjar, they are characterised by the abundance of Flamboyant Gothic repertoires.



Infographic reconstruction of Lorca's Synagogue inside

The plasterwork in Lorca's synagogue comprises, at least: the hejal trefoil arch, the plaster frame of at least two undecorated windows, blind arch friezes, and panels which would decorate the hejal wall or cover the tebá. They probably date back to the last third of the 15th century.



Current appearance of the Synagogue

5 The Future of Lorca's Jewish Quarter



A1 Sector Platform

The set of restored and visited archaeological sites in the Parador area will be completed by those which may appear in the future.

We should highlight the fact that, at present, just a very small part of this historical gem –only 15%– has been excavated. Therefore, it is considered that the site still keeps numerous treasures inside.

Because of the good state of preservation of the remains found and all that still has not come to light in the eastern area, Lorca's Jewish quarter is destined to become one of Spain's biggest centres of Jewish culture and a great catalyst for the town's tourist offer.



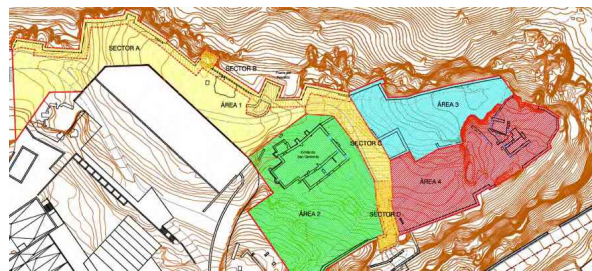
Castle's Jewish quarter draft

It is very important to work in this direction and consider the development of a frame with complementary actions with the same aim, enhancing joint projects and proposals of cultural, tourist and academic nature.



Archaeological excavations

With this purpose, it is essential to obtain funds for research related to Lorca's historical archive. The archive keeps many documents of the town's Jewish past, which have never been studied, and that would make it possible to configure a map to get to know the castle's historical and archaeological reality in the Middle Ages and make it available to every citizen.



Eastern area initial zoning plan

Likewise, the possibility of obtaining funds to restore a house within Lorca's historical quarter should be considered. This house would be used as a centre of interpretation and study of the town's Jewish past. Its aim would be the enhancement, conversion to a museum piece and spreading of the wealth of Jewish culture, custom and traditions among tourists and locals, encouraging intercultural understanding and knowledge of the Hebrew tradition.