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## **Ancient Jewish cemetery on Montjuïc, Barcelona**

### **Philosophy of my work**

I am an architect and researcher and I am fundamentally active for a dignification of heritage, to take into account that "soul" to which I refer in the title of this paper, which is the differentiating element of each culture and is reflected in the creation of the space occupied by human beings, such as a neighborhood or a cemetery. A heritage recovery project must facilitate that soul to shine in all its splendor and in all its dimension. This will not be possible without the contribution of the collective that created that space. In this case, I mean that the contribution of the Jewish community is essential.

Cemeteries confront us with the enigma of the human being, a subject as sensitive as life and death. I am very interested in cemeteries, not from an archaeological point of view, but in terms of the intangible aspects.

### **Geographical, historical, demographic information**

Barcelona is on the NE Mediterranean coast, near the French border. The city, which today is very extended, in the Middle Ages was concentrated in the area near the port and in the surrounding burghs.



Jewish Quarters -Calls major and minor- and Jewish cemetery

On the Mediterranean and South of the city, there is a mountain called Montjuïc (mountain of the Jews) since the 9 c., when the Jewish cemetery was established there.

In the Gothic quarter there were two Jewish quarters and also in the outskirts of Barcelona they owned farmland. These were the urban spaces that the Jewish community used, for life and for death? "until the end of time".

The city of Barcelona had the largest Jewish population in the kingdom of Aragon, reaching approximately 4,000 people in the mid-14th century (out of a total of 32,000 inhabitants in the city).

The first news of Jewish presence dates back to the 9th century, and I will refer to three very different documentary sources.

- A rabbinical responsa by Rav Amram Gaon, who supervises the making of a sidur "at the request of the Jews of Barcelona", with the prayers for every day of the year. (1)
- The sale of a plot of land in the year 878, locating the parcel "monte iudeigo" (2).

Since it is a toponym - Jewish mount - we can infer that the cemetery had already existed for some time.

A letter of 1368 that the Jewish community of Tortosa sends to Pedro IV, King of Aragon, asking permission to enlarge its cemetery. In it he refers to the one in Barcelona as very extensive and very old and mentions the tombs "where there have been for more than 500 years." (3) This reference takes us back to the second half of the 9th century. To date there is no data on Jewish presence in the city prior to that time.

### **Evolution of the plot during the 20th century**

At the end of the 19th century Montjuïc had not yet undergone a major transformation. There was still stone quarrying (which greatly affected its morphology), agricultural areas, a castle and a growing settlement of huts of migrant workers from other regions of the country.

In 1929 the International Exposition was held and its construction was followed by the construction of educational, cultural and sports centers, gardens and attractions. This development transformed Montjuïc from a mountain into our central park, not because of its geographical location but because of its varied leisure offer.

Some of these constructions also affected the area of the old cemetery.

The Club de Tiro dates from 1946-47, when 171 graves and some tombstones were found, many of which were fractured during the excavations. (4)

The collection of whole elements, broken and small fragments identified in buildings, do not reach seventy in total.

Some time later, in an adjacent area, on the other side of the road, an amusement park was built, placing the structures over the tombs that are approximately 2 m below ground. When the municipal concession expired, this space was converted into a park and the Joan Brossa Gardens were opened to the public in 2003.



Different interventions during 20 and 21 centuries

At that time, there was still no reference to a sector of the gardens being a place to respect the graves and evoke the memory of the Jewish community.

Among the funerary stelae, the oldest is a broken piece that, although small, gives the year (4)804, which corresponds to 1043-1044 of the common era. (5)



With the disintegration of the Jewish community at the end of the 14th century, the cemetery was awarded by the King to an order of nuns who sold the tombstones for construction. Most of these fragments with Hebrew letters can be seen in a building next to the cathedral. It should be noted that most of the buildings in which *matsevo*

(tombstones) were reused have already been demolished and replaced by others in later centuries, so we have no traces of more fragments.

### **Actions in the 21st century**

In 2001, plans were made to improve a platform that had been an outdoor pigeon shooting area adjacent to the Shooting Club. The new garden would be called "del Mirador del Campo de Tiro", without any reference to a connection with the Jewish history of this part of the mountain. Anticipating that there would be graves in that area, an archaeological excavation is scheduled to see how deep to go for foundations, plumbing, etc. Some 500 graves are opened and a single tombstone (in-situ) is found, that of "Miriam, wife of Rabbi Isaac bar Levi....who died in the month of Kislev 4990". The epitaph is complete...we know who is buried there since the 13th century. (6)



Area excavated in 2001, in preparation for the new gardens of the Shooting club overlook terrace

### **Dignifying a piece of Catalan heritage**

In 2006 the City Council announced in the press the imminent start of the landscaping works. With an architect colleague (from my community), we organized a request to the Catalan government for the area to be declared a Cultural Asset of National Interest (maximum level of protection according to the Catalan Heritage Law). This petition was signed by Jewish institutions in Barcelona and a civil entity.

With our scientific advisor -who would later direct our research- and the technicians of the Directorate of Heritage, we defined the area to be protected based on what was known so far about grave finds and the topography of the site.

In 2007, we tried to stop excavations in Toledo, Tarrega (Catalonia) and Lucena (Andalusia), to sit down and talk about respecting our cemeteries. Faced with local and international pressure, the Spanish government and the Federation of Jewish Communities signed an agreement. According to this protocol, the Federation must be informed every time a Jewish cemetery is found during the execution of construction works. (7) This is the first time that this procedure has been established in this country, allowing joint decisions to be taken on how to act.

Pending a resolution to the request for protection of the Barcelona cemetery, we established the Zakhor Study Center (8) with the aim of conducting research in documentary sources to define its boundaries. We intended to work - on paper versus excavating - in accordance with the criteria of Judaism regarding cemeteries and respecting a burial until the end of days.

Avoiding further excavations was a way of taking into account that this site represents the identity of a part of society, with its own criteria in funerary matters.

The research began with the collaboration of the Zakhor Study Center and the Montjuïc Study Center, thanks to a grant from a European foundation and with the help of documentalists to explore the archives.

In 2009, once we had started the research, it was resolved to grant the classification of Cultural Property in favor of the old cemetery, based on the area we had delimited in the application. (9) This resolution annulled the works planned for the garden and the site is now protected but -although fenced- it is still abandoned, as if it were no man's land. Someday, when there is political will, there will be a garden of memory honoring the Jewish community that lived in Barcelona.

From the Zakhor Center, we took care of the edition of a book to provide the public with information about the principles and criteria of our funeral practice. Four prestigious academics collaborated writing about our tradition, on what criteria it is based, decisions from different periods -some of them from Barcelona-, and how to do archaeology respecting the graves. It is the only book in Spain on this topic. (10)

### **The research (11)**

We had at our disposal archaeological, notarial and cartographic sources.

The **archaeological** ones give information of findings of graves, as for example in the area of the Parque de Atracciones (previously military batteries), where remains were found although it is not documented.

Where the current Club de Tiro is located, 171 burials were found in 1946. Finally, the findings in 2001, during the archaeological excavation in anticipation of the landscaping of the platform adjacent to the previous area.

The **notarial references** exceeded all our expectations and those of the historians, who were convinced that we would not find any information in the archives.

The most revealing finding was the protocol of 1394 by which John I, King of Aragon, cedes the Jewish cemetery to an order of nuns. Let us take into account that in 1391 there was a wave of attacks on the Jewish communities of Castile and Aragon, after which the Barcelona community did not recover. This document clearly defines the boundaries of the plot in the four cardinal points, east, west, south (meridie) and north (circione) and identifies the owners of the neighboring lands. It will be our starting point for further exploration of the transmission and subdivision of property.

Among the documents in six notarial archives, we note that - over the centuries - the description of the plots of land in the centuries - the description of the plots of land includes place names and references to the 'cemetery' or the 'path of the Jews'. In other words, the memory on paper was not lost.

- 1400 *cimiterium antiquum judeorum civitate Barchinone*
- 1500 *sita in Montis judaici in loco dicto el camí dels Jueus*
- 1600 *in podio montis judaici ad latus sementerii antiquitis nuncupati judeorum*
- 1700 *habeo et possideo in podio montis judaici ad latii Simenterii Judeorum*
- 1800 *llinda a orient amb el camí dit vulgarment camí dels Jueus*
- 1900 *a la montaña de Montjuic...inmediata al cementerio de los judíos*

The **cartographic references**, although scarce, are very valuable. The oldest is a map from 1694 that indicates "el fosar de los judíos", precisely in the area where our research was focused.

A real gem is a 1912 plan, handmade, with the names of the owners of each plot in the same area we studied, references to geographical elements and buildings that would later appear as toponyms in the notarial protocols. Although these structures no longer exist, the reference in the documents allows us to link the description of the plots to define the limits of the cemetery, which was our initial objective.



All the references overlaid on an air view

The most current plan is a 1914 plot plan in which each plot is identified with the number of the corresponding box of notarial documents. The general area of the necropolis occupies about fifteen plots in this plan and, although there are only the files of four of them, the information provided is sufficient for a good proposal of extension.

We collected all the information from the plots, findings of graves and toponymy (Torrente de los Naranjos, Camino de los judíos, buildings such as Torre Forta, Font Trobada, Vista Alegre) and superimposed it on an aerial view. This has allowed us to conclude which would be the plot of the old Jewish cemetery and where the Jewish road would have run. Even if we do not know where the Jews entered and left the cemetery, surely there would have been a point of water from one of the many natural springs, for the ritual washing of hands when leaving a cemetery.

The cemetery probably began in the eastern part of the marked area. With the demographic expansion of Barcelona in the 13th century, the Call Menor (2nd Jewish quarter) was created and the cemetery was probably extended to the West.

Like all research of this type there is always more to explore, but it is necessary to mark a point and apart at some point. Once we had a proposal for the perimeter of the cemetery, in 2012 we delivered the report of the work to the areas of Heritage of the Catalan government and the municipal government, to the Museum of History and its archaeological services.

Then, with the publication of the work on the website of the Zakhor Study Center, we finalized our activities. (12)

This year 2021, almost a decade later, I have had some communication with the municipal technicians to try to compare what we have studied in separate ways.

### **A few thoughts**

The site pending action can be seen from a very popular viewpoint terrace. People from Barcelona and foreign visitors climb this part of the mountain from where there is a spectacular view over the city and the harbor.

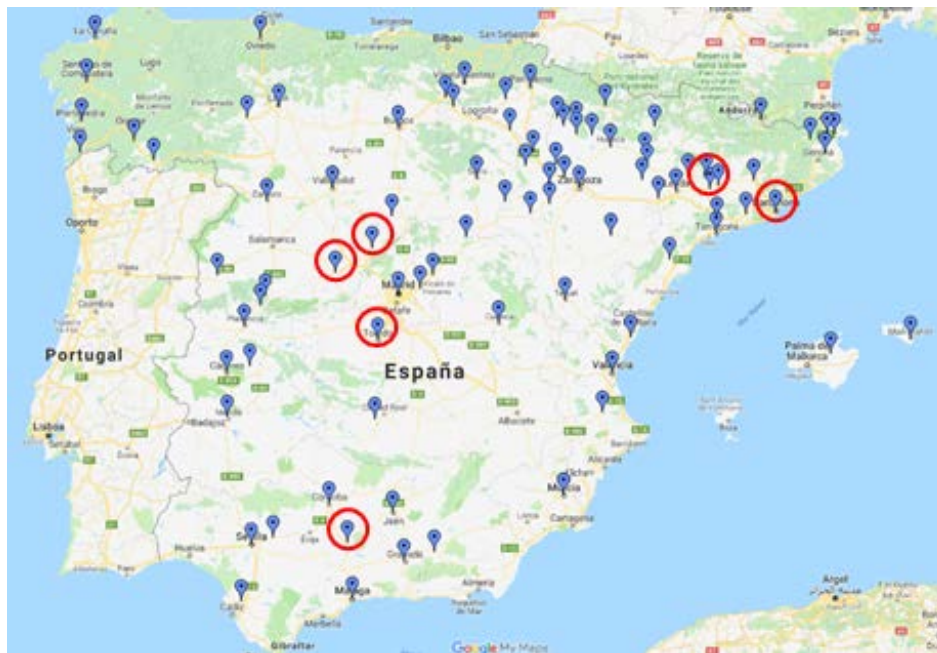
Our cemetery, at the foot, still looks like this.



Most of the population does not know its history, and it is precisely here that we can explain why the mountain is called Montjuïc (Mount of the Jews).

Obviously a project that respects the memory of the Jewish collective will bring this space closer to the local society, to visitors to the city and, of course, to the Jewish residents of Barcelona.

The old cemeteries are an "eternal home" and deserve that respect for the same criteria with which they were created. Perhaps the Sephardim around the world will find a way to promote the identification and marking of all the cemeteries where their families are buried in Spain.



Some cemeteries mentioned in archival documents, have been studied and/or signposted

There is still a long way to go, such as, for example:

- an inventory of cemeteries in the Spanish state;
- documentary research to be able to identify their boundaries;
- signage to inform about the Jewish presence in these localities;
- respect them in honor of the cultural diversity of the society; and, we cannot forget,
- the necessary dialogue between science and religion to resolve the tensions of not being able to open graves and study the remains.



## References

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- (1) Amram Ben Sheshna, gaón de Sura (Babilonia) in the middle of the 9th century (according to one of his responsa in 858 CE he already exercised this role). The Seder Rav Amram originated in a responsum that was apparently sent to the community of Barcelona. It is the oldest Jewish prayer order in existence. Louis Ginzberg, Ph.D.; Profesor de Talmud, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York City. ©2002-2021, *JewishEncyclopedia.com*
- (2) 18 June 878, is considered to be the first time that the name of Montjuic is documented. It is the donation that a certain Casto makes of a land of his property "in territorio barchinonense, in Monte Iudeigo, in termino Villa Nova qui mihi advenit per voce parentum meorum" to the house of Santa Eulalia. *Liber Antiquitatum sedis Barchinone. fol. 157, libro I. Arxiu Històric de la Ciutat de Barcelona*
- (3) A. Curto Homedes, "El cementiri Jueu de Tortosa", en Actes del Primer Col·loqui d'Història dels Jueus a la Corona d'Aragó, Lleida 1991, p. 407. Citado por Jordi Casanovas Miró en "Las necrópolis judías hispanas, las fuentes y la documentación frente a la realidad arqueológica. Juderías y Sinagogas de la Sefarad Medieval". Ediciones de la Universidad de Castilla La Mancha (2003)
- (4) A. Duran i Sampere, J.M. Millas Vallicrosa. Una necrópolis judaica en el Montjuich de Barcelona. *Sefarad, Revista de Estudios Hebraicos y Sefardíes*, Madrid. (1947)
- (5) J. Casanovas Miró. Las Inscripciones funerarias hebraicas medievales de España. *Monumenta Palaeographica Medii Aevi. Series Hebraica. 4.1 Barcelona, Cataluña (2004)* Brepols Publishers, ISBN: 978-2-503-51261-7
- (6) X. Maese i Fidalgo, Jordi Casanovas i Miró. Nova aproximació a la cronologia del cementeri jueu de Montjuïc (Barcelona). *Tamid 4 (Barcelona, 2002-2003)*
- (7) Protocol for the exhumation of human remains from historic Jewish necropolises. [https://www.observatorioreligion.es/upload/76/08/Protocolo\\_de\\_actuacion\\_para\\_la\\_exhumacion\\_de\\_restos\\_humanos\\_de\\_necropolis\\_judias\\_historicas\\_FCJE.pdf](https://www.observatorioreligion.es/upload/76/08/Protocolo_de_actuacion_para_la_exhumacion_de_restos_humanos_de_necropolis_judias_historicas_FCJE.pdf)
- (8) Centre d'Estudis Zakhor ceased its activities in 2012
- (9) Designation of Cultural Property of National Interest. DOGC núm. 4849 - 26/03/2007 <https://dogc.gencat.cat/es/document-del-dogc/?documentId=482446>
- (10) Centre d'Estudis Zakhor (ed.) La tradició funerària en el judaisme (2010) Palma: Leonard Muntaner, Editor. Col·lecció Mònjuïc/2, ISBN: 978-84-92562-12-1  
Artículos de Yamin Levy, David Kramer, Iom Tov Assis y Jacques Neguer
- (11) All references mentioned in this article, documents, maps, are properly quoted in the website of the research detailed in the following note 12.
- (12) Middle Ages Jewish cemetery in Barcelona on Montjuic. Definition of its boundaries, 9c. to 15c. [https://urbancultours.com/MONTJUIC/index\\_ENG.html](https://urbancultours.com/MONTJUIC/index_ENG.html)