

Reconstruction drawing
by Aurél Budai

*Great Synagogue
in Buda Castle from
the Matthias Era*

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„The Buried” Synagogue

In Buda Castle, a synagogue is buried some 4-5 metres under the house at number 21-23 Táncsics Mihály Street. The synagogue was built during the reign of King Matthias, probably in 1461, on a piece of land owned by Jakab Mendel, who later became the first Jewish prefect. In terms of dimensions and level of detail it is on par with Prague’s Old New Synagogue and the Old Synagogue in Cracow, and its condition and tall walls render it a unique object among the architectural finds of the Buda area dating back to that era.

In 1686 the synagogue was burnt down and collapsed, burying its victims, and it was almost three hundred years later that archaeologist László Zolnay and his team discovered it by accident in 1964. Sadly, the late medieval synagogue could only be excavated in part; further work was not permitted by the authorities and the ruins had to be reburied. This unknown relic of the past has been hiding in the ground ever since.

Archaeological dig photos, Budapest History Museum



The First Medieval Jewish Quarter

Several Jewish quarters were created in Buda Castle in the medieval ages. The first Jews arrived in the country after the 1241-1242 Mongol invasion, together with the German settlers invited by King Béla IV to help the surviving Hungarian and German population defend the newly built castle walls. The king granted the Jews freedom of worship and in 1251 issued a royal patent granting them the right to build a synagogue as their taxes proved a stable source of income for the treasury. The first Jewish quarter in Buda was situated on the western side of today's Szent György Street, near Fehérvári Gate, then called Jewish Gate.

The first synagogue built here is also mentioned in the Illuminated Chronicle. Once it was excavated and documented, the 13th century building was reburied. At present only the ritual Jewish bath, the mikveh, excavated in 2000, can be visited.

In 1360 Luis the Great expelled Jews from the country, most probably because they were not prepared to convert to Christianity. The Jews of Buda also had to leave but they were allowed to return four years later.



The first Jewish quarter in Buda

The Second Medieval Jewish Quarter

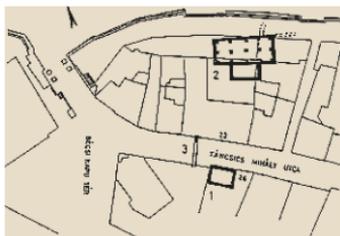
The first Jewish quarter ceased to exist during the reign of King Sigismund (1389-1437) and a new area for Jews was designated next to the first royal seat (known as Kammerhof/Magna Curiae Regis), on the western side of the street now known as Táncsics Mihály (Jew street until the 18th century).

When King Matthias ascended the throne in 1458 the position of the Buda Jewry got stronger. King Matthias created the office of the "Jewish prefect", a rank equivalent to that of a high aristocrat, whose holder was the leader and legal representative of the Jewish community in Hungary. The first Jewish prefect was Jakab Mendel, who was appointed to the office in 1467.

His palace was in today's Táncsics Mihály Street, in two buildings on opposite sides of the street, joined by a skyway on the first floor. This is where he built the main Ashkenazi synagogue of the community, opposite the prayer house, which is now a memorial museum.

After the death of King Matthias the hatred for Jews escalated. They were regularly attacked and their homes ransacked. In 1526, after the first battle of Mohács, Suleiman I* occupied Buda and took the entire Jewish population to Turkey where they were settled in major cities of the Ottoman Empire.

Later new Jewish settlers arrived in Buda who, according to stone inscriptions deciphered by Sándor Scheiber, also restored the synagogue built in King Matthias' time.



The second Jewish quarter in Buda and inscriptions from the synagogue

* Suleiman II in the Hungarian original; however, it was Suleiman I (reign: 1520 - 1566), also known as "Suleiman the Magnificent" who captured Buda. (translator's note)

Ottoman Rule – Reconquest of Buda, 1541 – 1686

After 1541 Jews had a better life as the Ottomans proved more tolerant of them than Christians at the time. Despite the constant warfare, the population lived in relative peace, as commented by Izsák Schulhof in his Buda Chronicle, which recounts the events of the reconquest of Buda.

In 1686 the combined Christian forces successfully beat the Ottomans out of the city following a long and bitterly fought battle. The Buda Chronicle is a credible account of the events of the reconquering and the subsequent looting and massacring as experienced by Izsák Schulhof, Rabbi of Buda at the time, who survived after many hardships.

As the city was looted the synagogue was burnt to the ground; the Jewish population taking refuge in the building was slain by the besieging forces who then set fire to the building. One of Europe's most beautiful synagogues disappeared from view for centuries.

Reconstruction drawing by Aurél Budai



Excavation

The historical monument, which is of extraordinary significance in both art history and religious history, was discovered by archaeologist László Zolnay in 1964. The trial excavation revealed that the site conceals one of Europe's largest gothic synagogues, surprisingly intact. However, the authorities declined permission for the full excavation of the building, which was destroyed on 2 September 1686 during the reconquest of Buda, so the test pit had to be backfilled.

The fragments of inscription stones found during the trial excavation are now exhibited in the former Jewish prayer room in Táncsics Mihály Street, which functions as a memorial museum. The remains of the victims slain during the siege were buried by the Chevra Kadisha (Jewish Burial Society) according to Jewish tradition.

Professor Sándor Scheiber established that the building is probably the synagogue built by Jakab Mendel, which was thought to have been destroyed. In the 1960s he even secured sponsors for the full excavation of the building, reburied in 1965, but the political regime at the time declined permission. Since then a number of organisations and private individuals (Gläser Jakab Memorial Fund, Hungarian Jewish Cultural Association, Society of Buda Citizens, Schulhof Foundation, Professor Yossi Ben Nun, Szilveszter Vízi E, a member and former President of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Dr Aurél Budai architect and his daughter Dr Györgyi Gábor, architect Szabolcs Bánszky, András Végh, museum curator and archaeologist, Dalma Dankó, museum curator and art historian and many others) have lobbied for the excavation to be continued.



*Jakab Mendel's seal,
BHM*



*Fragment of an inscription
stone from the synagogue, BHM*

Architectural Information

The vaulted ceiling of the double-nave hall structure was supported by five central columns. Its floor area was 26 metres by 11 metres, with an internal height of 3 metres. The hall of worship was among the largest in Europe at the time and was likely designed by master builders from the court of King Matthias. The synagogue was used unaltered until 1526.

When the Jewish community returned to Buda in 1541, they found that the vault of the synagogue had collapsed. Instead of rebuilding the original design, a simpler flat wooden ceiling was constructed. During the reconquest of Buda in 1686 the building burned down, the roof collapsed and buried everything underneath. Christians moved into the houses of the abandoned Jewish quarter and buried the ruins, along with the dead.

Visualisation of the excavation by Rafael de la Fontaine

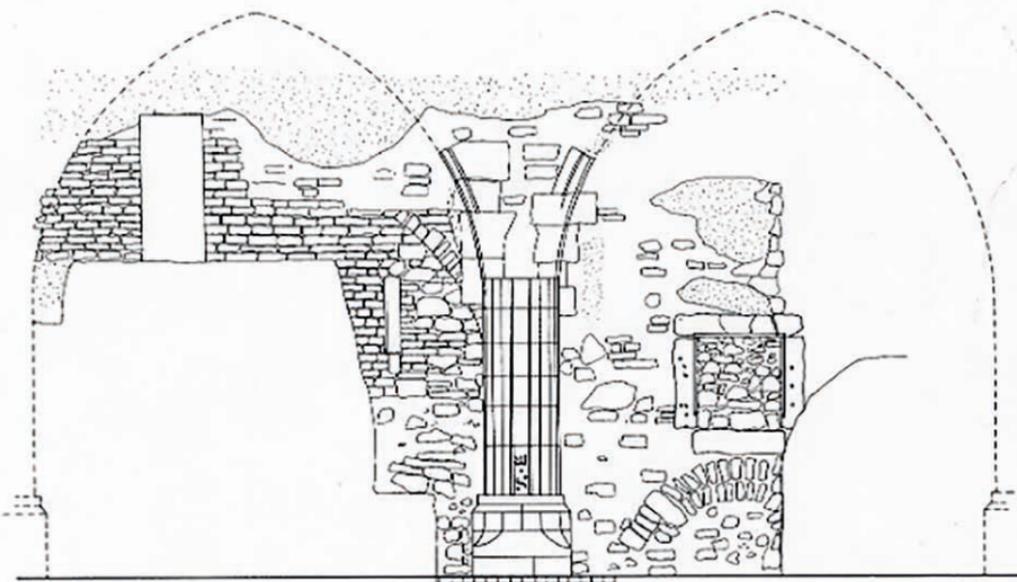
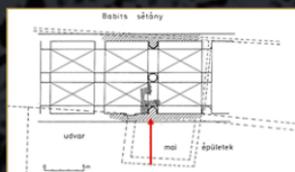


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The floor level of the synagogue is about 5 metres below the current ground level. The remaining walls and columns rise about 4–4.5 metres above the floor. The northern wall was incorporated into the medieval city wall, which essentially ran along the same line as the enclosure wall of Babits Mihály Promenade (formerly Bastion Promenade), while its southern wall was in line with the façade of the 18th century building built on top of it.

The remains of the building can be found under the front garden facing Babits Mihály Promenade.

The excavations also revealed that under this building lies a prayer room for women, whose window opens into the synagogue. On this side the wall of the synagogue survived 8 metres high, together with semi-columns and the remains of arched ribs.



Excavation drawings

LET'S DIG IT OUT!

The Let's Dig It Out! – Civilians for the Excavation of the Matthias-era Great Synagogue" initiative launched by a group of organisations and private individuals organises events to promote this unique architectural and religious monument situated in Buda Castle. On 19 September 2015, on Cultural Heritage Day, they organised a conference and exhibition about the buried synagogue in the Museum of Piety (now Museum of National Remembrance) situated in the Fiume Road National Graveyard. They also organise guided walks featuring the Jewish monuments of the Castle District on the anniversary of the demise of the synagogue, led by Gábor Deák, which also include the buried structure dating back to the reign of King Matthias. In 2016 a memorial plaque marking the location of the synagogue was unveiled by the Municipality of the 1st District and the Hungarian Jewish Cultural Association.

*Conference and exhibition in the Museum of Sepulchral Culture,
18 September 2015*



*Unveiling of the memorial plaque on Babits Mihály Promenade,
2 September 2016*

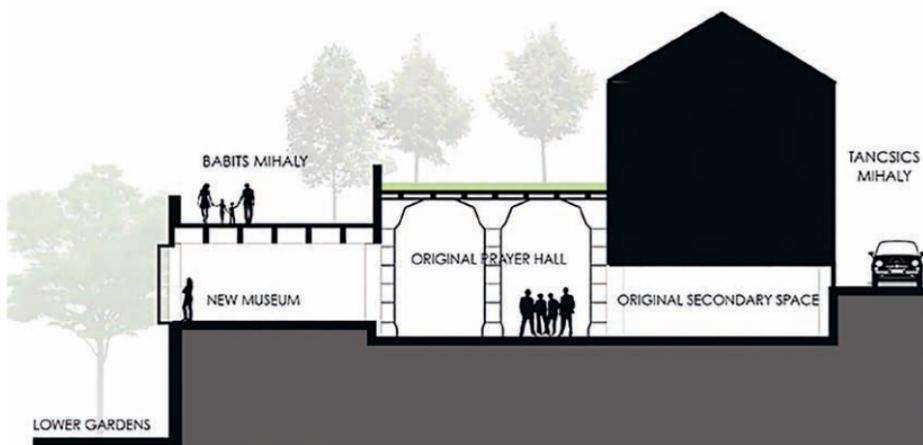
Plans

The excavation plan and the cultural and touristic concept developed by Rafael de la Fontaine includes an underground visitor centre next to the excavated sacred area.

The synagogue is situated under the garden of a residential building and Babits Mihály Promenade. It would be excavated and the backfill removed ensuring that the existing building remains intact, and it would attract tourists to a neighbourhood currently not as popular with visitors as the area south of Matthias Church. Another argument in favour of excavating the synagogue is the fact that there are no other known architectural monuments of similar size and condition in Hungary.

Email addresses of the "Let's Dig It Out!" movement and the Hungarian Jewish Cultural Association (MAZSIKE) (mazsike@gmail.com, www.mazsike.hu)

Visualisation by Rafael de la Fontaine



LOWER GARDENS
LOCATION OF FRAMED OPENING



BABITS MIHALY
ROAD ABOVE MUSEUM



CONNECTING ROAD
ENTRANCE RAMP TO MUSEUM

MATTHIAS-ERA GREAT SYNAGOGUE IN BUDA CASTLE

- built in 1461 by Jewish prefect Jakab Mendel
- used in its original form until 1526
- damaged in the siege of Buda in 1530
- partially restored in 1541
- burnt down during the recapturing of Buda in 1686, then buried by the new settlers, together with the victims' bodies inside
- in 1964 lead archaeologist László Zolnay discovers the remains of a building during renovation works in Buda Castle; the ruins are identified by Professor Sándor Scheiber as those of the synagogue built by Jakab Mendel
- the partially excavated building is reburied in 1965
- a memorial plaque marking the site of the Matthias-era synagogue in Babits Mihály Promenade is unveiled in 2016

ONE OF EUROPE'S BIGGEST GOTHIC SYNAGOGUES

In 2020 further efforts were made to have the buried synagogue excavated and put on public display. Excavation work is expected to start next year. Experts will develop architectural and preservation options for the site. To support this work, the "Let's Dig It Out!" civilian movement has launched an international fundraising initiative coordinated by the Hungarian Jewish Cultural Association. If you wish to contribute please visit the website of MAZSIKE (www.mazsike.hu) for further details.

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