MEDIEVAL
1195-1306

MIKVEH
JEWISH RITUAL BATH

Current view of the mikveh basin

AT THE ROOTS OF MONTPELLIER

Jewish presence

Montpellier's Jewish community is thought to have been established after the year 1000, in the early days of the city. It grew **during the 12th century**, welcoming members fleeing religious repression in Andalusia.

In his will of 1121, Lord Guilhem V forbade his successors from allowing members of the Jewish community or Saracens to hold the office of *bayle* (representative in charge of justice). This text is **the oldest written record** attesting to a Jewish presence in Montpellier. In 1181, Guilhem VIII's edict on medical schools encouraged the Jewish community to become more accepted within the city.

THE MIKVEH FOR KIDS

In the Middle Ages,
the *bayle* was
the local lord's representative
in charge of justice.
If a Jewish person could
aspire to become a *bayle*,
this means that
the town's Jewish community
had become large.

Mahzor
Circa 1400
preserved in the Montpellier Archives
This 253-page collection of prayers
was written in Hebrew by members of
the Jewish community from Montpellier
who took refuge on the papal land near Avignon,
following their expulsion from the city.
More than a mere liturgical book for celebrating
Jewish holidays, this manuscript is now the only
remaining evidence of the rites of Montpellier's
Jewish community at that time.
Aware of its heritage value, the City of
Montpellier acquired the collection in 2008.

Major milestones in Montpellier's Jewish history during the Middle Ages

985 The Count of Melgueil donated a small agricultural estate to Guilhem, marking the start of Montpellier's history.

1121 Guilhem V mentioned the Jewish population in his will: this first written reference attests to the existence of a significant community.

1147 The Almohads began their conquest of Andalusia: the Jewish community fled to seek refuge around the Mediterranean.

1181 Guilhem VIII proclaimed freedom for all to teach medicine, regardless of one's origin.

late 12th century **The Jewish community in Montpellier built the mikveh.**

1306 King Philip the Fair's expulsion order affected the Jewish community in Montpellier. **The mikveh was no longer used for religious purposes.**

1349 Montpellier belonged to the French crown: discriminatory laws applied to the Jewish community in the city.

1373 The Jewish community in the city was required to wear the *rouelle* - wheel -, a small circular piece of cloth, to distinguish them from Christians.

1394 King Charles VI permanently expelled the Jewish community from France and confiscated their property. They were not officially allowed to return until the Revolution.

MONTPELLIER THE TOLERANT

A hospital city

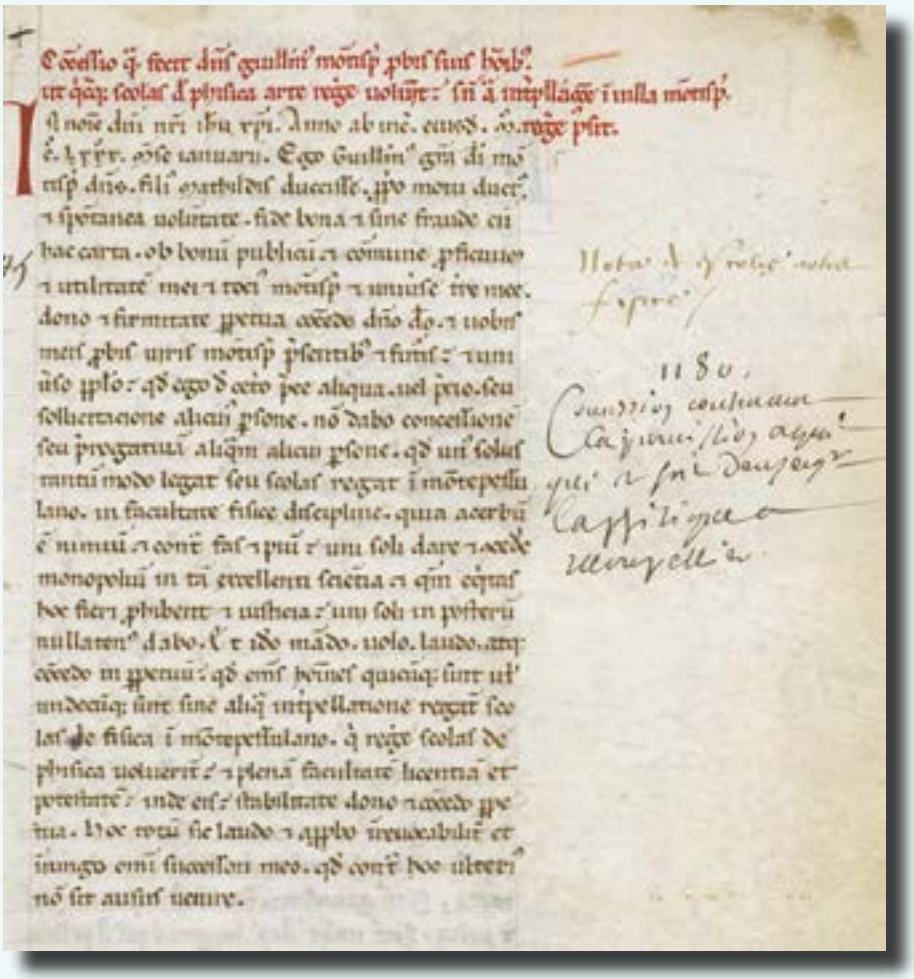
In the Middle Ages, the Jewish community suffered certain forms of discrimination: they were distinguished by specific clothing (pointed hats and distinctive signs such as the *rouelle*), were forbidden from owning property, etc. In Montpellier, the Jewish community enjoyed **greater tolerance**: freedom of worship, the possibility of celebrating religious holidays, the legal validity of marriages celebrated in the synagogue, access to property ownership under certain conditions, etc.

The Jewish community's situation deteriorated during the 14th century due to **discriminatory measures** and successive expulsions. They left the city permanently, following King Charles VI's edict of expulsion, which was promulgated in 1394.

THE MIKVEH FOR KIDS

In the Middle Ages, Jewish people were forced to wear pointed hats or sew a small piece of cloth called a *rouelle* onto their clothing in order **to distinguish them from Christians.**

Guilhem VIII's charter granting freedom to teach medicine in Montpellier
in the *Guilhem Cartulaire*
1181
preserved in the Montpellier Archives
By virtue of this act, Lord Guilhem VIII granted the people of Montpellier the freedom to teach medicine. This applied to "all men, whoever they may be and wherever they may come from".



MONTPELLIER CITY OF KNOWLEDGE

Benjamin of Tudela was a traveler from Navarre, Spain, steeped in brilliant Iberian Judaism. In *Sefer ha-Massaot* – his *Book of Travels* – he describes the Euro-Mediterranean Jewish communities, particularly the one in the city of Montpellier, which he discovered in 1160.

"Montpellier is located two miles from the sea and is very advantageous for trade. People come here from all over to do business. In short, you can find speakers of all languages here. Montpellier has the most famous doctors of the century. Some are very wealthy and very charitable, supporting all those who seek their help."

Little Cordoba

Under the influence of Jewish elites of Andalusian origin, Montpellier became **an intellectual capital**. Ideas flourished and concepts intermingled, echoing the golden age of Andalusia's capital, where Jews, Muslims and Christians once engaged in dialogue.

Thanks to their mastery of several languages, the Jewish community translated numerous Hebrew and Arabic texts into Latin and Occitan, thereby making **different areas of knowledge** accessible. Jewish scholars enriched the exact sciences and the sciences of Judaism with their knowledge. They distinguished themselves in the field of medicine in particular.

At the same time, the Jewish community played a major role in **the development of trade** with other Mediterranean cities. They were particularly active fabric and silk merchants.

The Jewish community in medicine

Members of the Jewish community were particularly present in the medical field, in which they developed and transmitted **Arab, Persian and ancient knowledge**.

In the 12th and 13th centuries, Isaac ben Abraham, Meshulam and Shem-Tob ben Isaac counted among the most illustrious doctors in Montpellier.

Tikoun hammadaim* ou *Care and remedies for all kinds of illnesses

14th century

Preserved in the Historical University Library of Medicine (University of Montpellier)

Written in Agde, this Hebrew manuscript is a collection of excerpts from otherwise-unknown medical treatises, making it highly rare and valuable.

MONTPELLIER'S

WISDOM

The famous Tibbonid dynasty

Among the most renowned members of the Jewish community in Montpellier, the **Ibn Tibbon family** stands out. Its members played an important role in the transmission of ancient knowledge, as they specialized in the translation of written works.

Samuel ibn Tibbon (1150-1230) is known for his translation of the works of Maimonides. His son **Moses ben Samuel ibn Tibbon** (who died in 1283) was a prolific writer who translated more than thirty Arabic works on medicine and the exact sciences. Samuel's grandson and Moses' nephew, Jacob ben Machir ibn Tibbon (1236-1304) – aka **Don Profiat** in Occitan – worked with his Christian colleagues, including physician Armengaud Blaise, Arnaud de Villeneuve's nephew, and produced original works, particularly in astronomy.

THE MIKVEH FOR KIDS

In the Middle Ages, the Jewish community was **multilingual**, meaning they spoke several languages: Hebrew, Arabic, Latin and Occitan.

THE JEWISH MOUNT

“Grandmont de Montpellier,
the stones from which jewels were
extracted, a mountain beloved by God,
a palace where he had his dwelling.
The wall of love and faith surrounds it.
It is encircled by bravery, it speaks of grace.
The sciences rejoice in its streets.
Upon its dwellings, flocks of wise men
rest and feed upon exegesis,
Talmud and Mishnah.”

This lament by Rabbi Simeon ben Joseph,
aka En Duran de Lunel, attests to
his attachment to Montpellier following
the expulsion of the Jewish community
in 1306.

The Jewish community in the city

In the Middle Ages, Montpellier was called *Ir ha-Har* in Hebrew, which means the “mount city”. The inhabitants of Montpellier were called the *Harari*, **the “men of the mount”**.

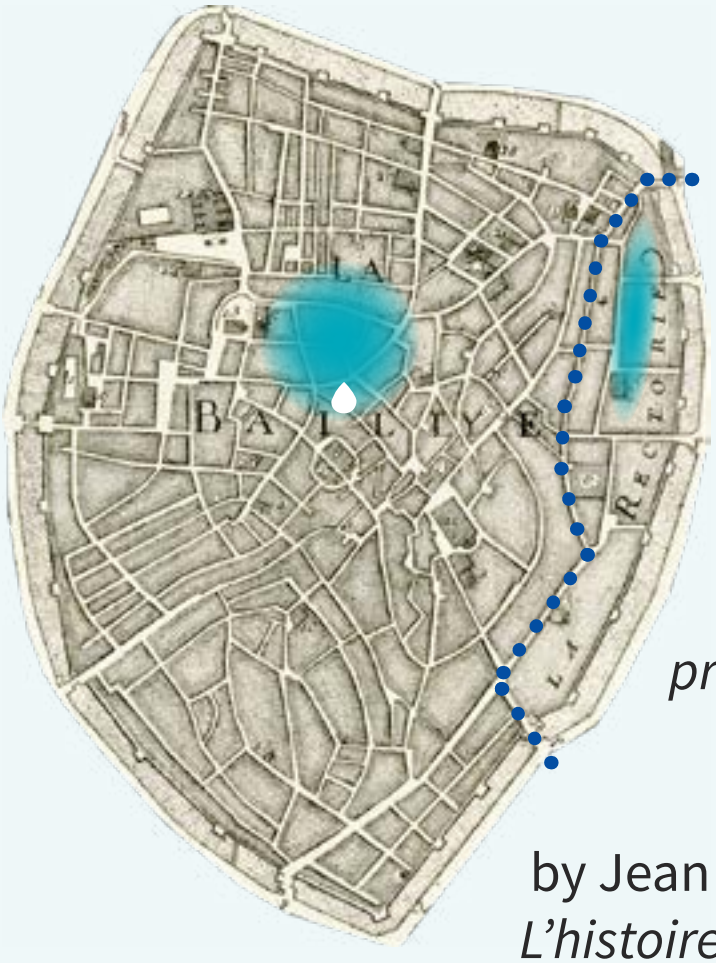
Within the city, Jewish people lived in **two open neighborhoods** among the Christians. The first was located near the Bishop of Maguelone’s residence (on what is now *Rue Salle-l’Évêque*). The second stood next to the lords of Montpellier’s residence (on what is now *Place de la Canourgue*).

This second neighborhood featured **the facilities** required for community life, including a school, a synagogue (mentioned as early as the beginning of the 13th century), an almshouse, a butcher’s shop and a ritual bath, the mikveh.

• • • • Boundary between
the bishop of Maguelone's domain (Rectorie)
and the lord of Montpellier's domain (Baylie)

Jewish quarters

Mikveh



Map of Montpellier before the Wars of Religion
18th century
preserved in the Émile-Zola Central Media Library

This map was engraved by Jean Villaret and published in *L'histoire de la ville de Montpellier* (*The History of the City of Montpellier*) in 1737. It features the districts belonging to the bishop (called *Rectorie*) and the lord (called *Baylie*). Historian and author of the book Charles d'Aigrefeuille provides a precise description of the mikveh's location and layout.

THE MIKVEH FOR KIDS

The street changed completely in the 1770s: it was widened and its facades were realigned. From then on, the vestiges of the Middle Ages were hidden from the eyes of passersby.

AT THE VERY SOURCE OF MONTPELLIER

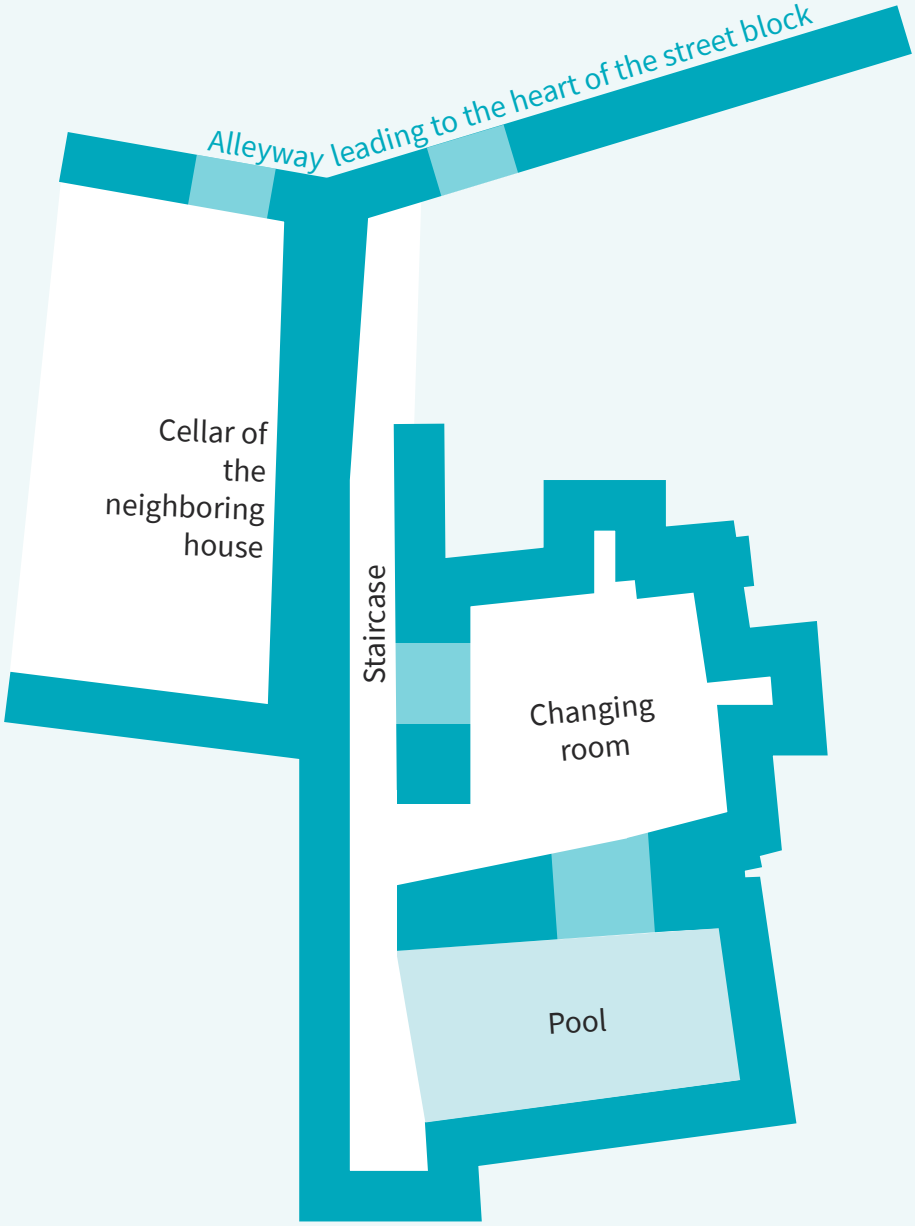
The mikveh: a ritual bath

In the Jewish faith, the mikveh is used for **spiritual purification**. Ablution is practiced on a regular basis, as well as on special occasions, such as before a wedding. Women purify themselves following each menstrual period and after childbirth.

After washing thoroughly, the believer undresses in the changing room, then completely immerses themselves in the pool located a few steps below.

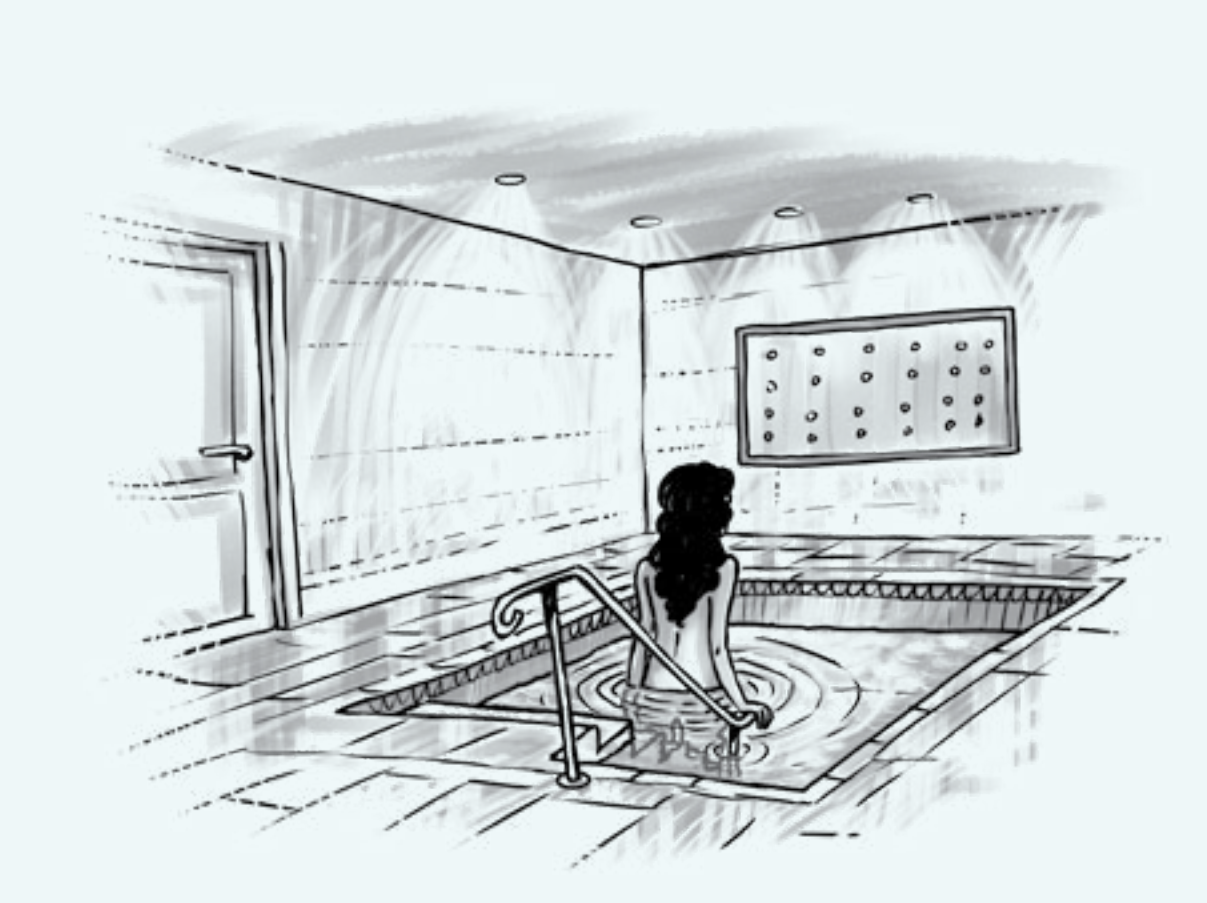
The mikveh in Montpellier is fed by **resurging groundwater**, which meets the religion's requirement for natural, pure and non-stagnant water.

Schematic plan of the underground level housing the medieval mikveh



THE MIKVEH FOR KIDS

Nowadays,
the medieval mikveh is
no longer in use.
The Jewish community
in Montpellier has
three contemporary mikvehs.



MONTPELLIER'S TREASURE

THE MIKVEH FOR KIDS

After the Jewish community left, the mikveh pool was used as **a well.** An opening was created in the ceiling to help collect the water.

Mikvehs in Europe

A dozen mikvehs dating from this period can now be visited throughout Europe, constituting rare examples of the Jewish diaspora during the Middle Ages. Most of them still contain water but are no longer used for religious purposes.

With its remarkably well-preserved changing room and pool, the mikveh in Montpellier is **one of the most exceptional examples** of Europe’s mikvehs, alongside those in Syracuse in Sicily, Besalù in Catalonia, as well as Worms and Speyer in Germany.

- Mikveh filled with water
- Dry mikveh

- 6th-8th centuries
- 11th-13th centuries
- 14th-15th centuries

Map of medieval mikvehs open to visitors in Europe

TODAY AND TOMORROW

A dedicated institute

The *Maïmonide-Averroès-Thomas d'Aquin* Institute was founded in 2000 by René-Samuel Sirat and Georges Frêche. It aims to promote the history and culture of Judaism and other monotheistic religions, as well as medieval Hebrew heritage, in a spirit of openness and interfaith dialogue.

The name of the institute refers to three great thinkers of the Middle Ages, Jewish, Muslim and Christian.

Maimonides (1135-1204)
This philosopher and physician of Andalusian origin was the most renowned intellectual in the medieval Jewish world. Nicknamed “the eagle of the synagogue” or “the physician of Cordoba”, his work sought to reconcile faith and reason. His vision, which was disseminated throughout Europe thanks to Samuel ibn Tibbon’s translations in Lunel, sparked lively conceptual debates in Languedoc. This period in Montpellier is known as the “Maimonidean spark”.

Averroes (1126-1198)
Abu al-Walid Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Rushd, better known by his Latinized name Averroes, was an Andalusian scholar who is recognized as one of the greatest Islamic thinkers of the Middle Ages. As a renowned commentator on Aristotle’s texts, he disseminated ancient thought among his contemporaries, while studying the central theme of harmony between faith and reason.

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)
Born in the following century, he was considered one of the leading masters of Catholic philosophy and theology. This Doctor of the Church follows in the same tradition as his predecessors. His major work, the *Summa Theologica*, attempts to reconcile Christian thought with Aristotelian philosophy, offering his own attempt at combining faith and reason.

Frontispiece printed in the* Complete works *by Isaac ben Solomon Israeli
1515
Preserved in the Historical University Library of Medicine (University of Montpellier)
This Renaissance engraving depicts the Jewish physician Isaac Israeli surrounded by his counterparts, the Muslim Haly Abbas and the Christian Constantine the African, illustrating the dialogue between monotheistic religions.

THE MIKVEH FOR KIDS

The Jewish religion is **monotheistic:** Jewish people believe in one God, like Christians and Muslims.

A future facility

Since the site was acquired by the City of Montpellier in 1998, several archaeological excavations have provided a deeper understanding of the history and architecture underlying the site. The mikveh has been classified as a Historic Monument since 2004.

With the support of the Maimonides Institute, the City of Montpellier wishes to develop **a unique space** dedicated to learning about Jewish history in France’s Languedoc area during the Middle Ages.

Ultimately, the site will promote public awareness, encourage research and promote intercultural exchanges.

Conception
Montpellier Méditerranée Métropole
Pôle Culture et Patrimoine
Unité Patrimoines

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    Archives de Montpellier (15 S 1, AA1)
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MEDIEVAL

1195-1306

MIKVEH

JEWISH RITUAL BATH