

A mid-18th-century *mikveh* unearthed in the Jewish Historical Museum in Amsterdam

By JERZY GAWRONSKI and RANJITH JAYASENA

SUMMARY: In 2006 archaeological research was conducted in the New Synagogue, part of Amsterdam's Ashkenazi Synagogue complex, built between 1671 and 1752, which now houses the Jewish Historical Museum. The most remarkable find was a mid-18th-century *mikveh* or ritual bath, used for ceremonial purification by immersion; such baths played a key role in Jewish life. The excavated example was well preserved and retained its water supply and heating system. Although it served in a specific Jewish ritual context, the structure followed the everyday construction principles of Amsterdam builders.

INTRODUCTION

The two monumental synagogue complexes on Jonas Daniël Meijer Square in Amsterdam are the relics of the Jewish community that settled in the city following the arrival of the first Portuguese Jews at the end of the 16th century. North of the square stands the Portuguese Synagogue built in 1675, whereas the west side is bounded by the Ashkenazi synagogue complex of 1671–1752, comprising the Great and the New Synagogues. Prior to a refurbishing project of the Jewish Historical Museum which is housed in the New Synagogue, the Municipal Office for Monuments and Archaeology (BMA) conducted archaeological research underneath the building. The site lies in a fascinating part of Amsterdam. Following the city's second urban expansion of 1592–96 it formed part of the defensive zone, but after 1670 the area was gradually transformed into the centre of the flourishing Jewish community. Several structures were excavated; the most remarkable of them was a rectangular basin that proved to be a Jewish ritual bath or *mikveh*, which operated during the period 1752–1822.

Before the late 16th century, the site was part of a flat and waterlogged rural zone outside the city

wall. Following the 1578 'Alteration', when Protestants took over the city's administration from Catholics, and the blockade of Antwerp in 1585, Amsterdam's economy flourished to an unprecedented extent. As a consequence a large number of immigrants, especially merchants from the southern Netherlands, settled in the city. In 1592, faced with the growing population, a large-scale expansion of the urban area was undertaken. Four artificial islands were created by raising the level of the peaty subsoil with dumps of clay intermixed with rubble and domestic refuse. Three islands were used for the construction and maintenance of ships and one, Vlooienburg, situated in the curve of the Amstel River at the site of the present Waterlooplein, as an area for housing. Among the newcomers who settled on Vlooienburg were Sephardim or Portuguese Jews, refugees from the Iberian peninsula. In the 1630s they were followed by Ashkenazi Jews from Central and Eastern Europe. Subsequently Vlooienburg developed into the centre of Amsterdam's Jewish Quarter and remained so until the Second World War. In 1981–82, prior to the construction of the new City Hall, a large-scale archaeological research project was conducted on the two building blocks of Vlooienburg facing the Amstel. This investigation,

which included the excavation of 106 cesspits, provided a wealth of information on the predominantly Jewish neighbourhood. Artefactual evidence varied from kosher meat seals attached to avian leg bones to Hebrew-marked Netherlands faience Passover plates, Sabbath lamps and clay tobacco pipes marked with the names of their Jewish owners (Fig. 1).

THE ASHKENAZI SYNAGOGUE COMPLEX

Initially both Jewish communities used house synagogues for religious services. In the years following the completion of the fourth city expansion (1660), which gave Amsterdam its characteristic layout of near-concentric canals enclosing the medieval centre, building space became available on the site of the demolished town wall. In 1671 the Ashkenazi Great Synagogue was inaugurated on Deventer Houtmarkt (now Jonas Daniël Meijerplein), followed by the Portuguese Synagogue in 1675 (Fig. 2). The Great Synagogue was flanked by

a ritual bath (*mikveh*) and a sacristan's house. As a result of the growth of the Ashkenazi community, rapidly outnumbering the Sephardic community, it was soon found necessary to extend their religious complex. A second synagogue (Obbene Shul) was therefore built at the rear of the Great Synagogue, above a meat market, followed by a third one (Dritt Shul) inaugurated in 1700, on a site facing the Nieuwe Amstelstraat. Its final phase of extension began in the 1720s. By that time most of the surrounding area had already been built on; only a narrow plot next to the sacristan's house, sealed off by a high fence, was vacant. Here a small synagogue was built in 1730 but it proved to be only a temporary solution. Around 1750 four adjacent houses were bought by the Ashkenazi community, and soon afterwards both the 1730 synagogue and these houses were replaced by the New Synagogue. This building, characterized by its central glass dome and probably designed by the city's master builder Frederik Maybaum, was inaugurated on 25 March 1752 (Figs 2–3). The High German



FIG. 1

The material culture of Vlooienburg's Jewish community, Amsterdam: Netherlands faience Passover plate of 1750–75 with decoration imitating Chinese porcelain surrounding a Hebrew reference to the story of Exodus: 'for seven days you will eat matzot' (Waterlooplein site 1981–82, WLO-54-2). The central words mean 'meat' and 'Pesah' (photograph, W. Krook, Bureau Monumenten & Archeologie).

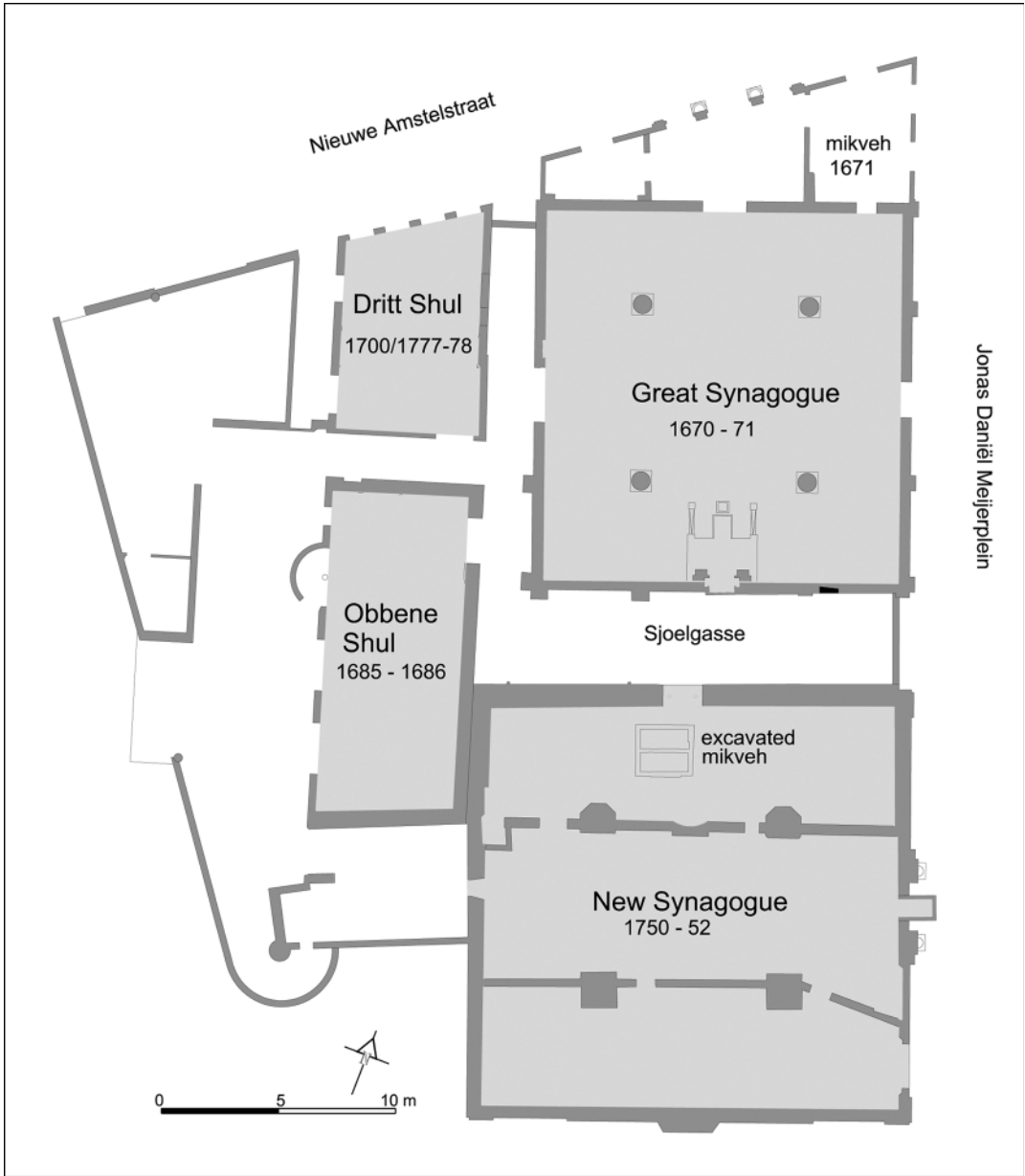


FIG. 2

Plan of the four synagogues of the Ashkenazi synagogue complex, Amsterdam (Bureau Monumenten & Archeologie).

Synagogue complex was used until the Second World War. After several temporary uses the Jewish Historical Museum moved into the complex in 1987.¹

THE MIKVEH

A *mikveh* was used for ceremonial purification by immersion (Fig. 4). It would usually consist of a

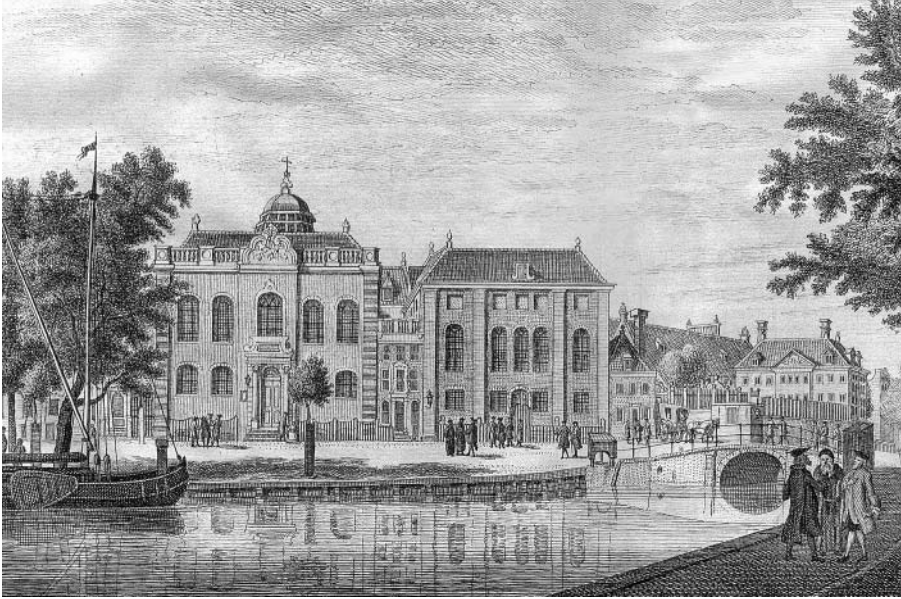
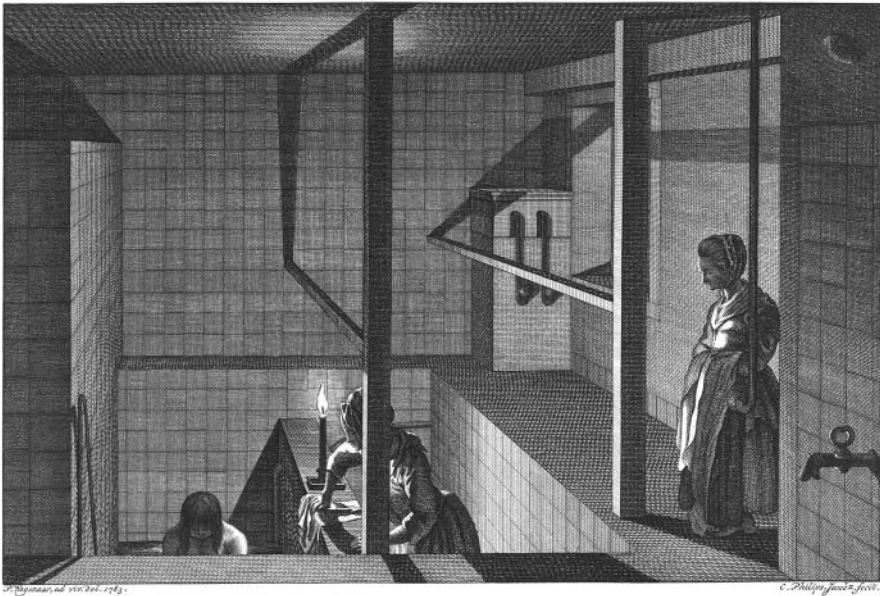


FIG. 3

View of (left to right) the New Synagogue, the new *mikveh* building that replaced the sacristan's house, the Great Synagogue and the old *mikveh* on the corner of the Nieuwe Amstelstraat, Amsterdam (engraving by Jan de Beijer, 1765, Bureau Monumenten & Archeologie).



HET BAD DER HOOGDUITSCH E JOODEN, TE AMSTERDAM.

FIG. 4

'The bath of the High German [Ashkenazi] Jews in Amsterdam'. It probably represents the excavated *mikveh* (engraving of 1783 by Casper Philip Jacobz, P. Wagenaar, Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam).

brick or stone basin with a series of steps leading down to its bottom. The dimensions were not prescribed, as long as the water level reached shoulder height. It had to be filled with at least 40 *se'á* (500 litres) of pure spring- or rainwater, after which additional filling with well water was allowed. The use of a *mikveh* was a significant aspect of Jewish life. Nowadays *mikveh'ot* are only used by orthodox Jews and therefore their numbers have decreased. Ritual immersion was required on a number of occasions:

- on entering a new stage of life, such as a wedding or conversion to Judaism.
- after a woman's menstruation.
- on the eve of Sabbath or festivals (although men were not obliged to immerse, orthodox men especially would practise immersion).
- prior to the use of cutlery made by non-Jews.

The 1671 Great Synagogue had its own *mikveh* in a square annexe with a hipped roof and a tall chimney. Historical records mention the use of a hearth, indicating that the basin was (partly) filled with heated water. In 1777 the ritual bath was renovated but not abandoned. Around 1825 the *mikveh* lost its function and after being backfilled was forgotten until it reappeared during the renovation of the building in the 1980s. The 1671 *mikveh*, now on display in the Jewish Historical Museum, was a rectangular brick tank, subdivided by a wall which formed two baths. The sides were lined with white tiles. Documentary evidence shows that in 1752, the year in which the New Synagogue was built, an additional *mikveh* was constructed on the site of the former sacristan's house. This bath also disappeared in the 19th century.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

The archaeological research under the New Synagogue produced the remains of both late 17th-century houses and the partition walls of the basement of the mid-18th-century synagogue. In 1750 four houses were demolished for the construction of the New Synagogue. This proved to have been a thorough operation, leaving only the wooden foundation piles and some dispersed bricks belonging to walls and wells. On one of the four plots were traces of the first houses built here in the 1670s. The remains consisted of a shallow basement in the front area of the house, where a well was situated. There were no traces of the small synagogue erected in 1730 because this structure was integrated into the building of the New Synagogue in 1750.

The New Synagogue was a rectangular structure, constructed around four marbled columns. The central part of the building was supported by two longitudinal walls, dividing the void underneath the floor into three equally wide spaces. Only the northern space, where the 1730 synagogue was located, appears to have served a specific function in the New Synagogue. This was the bathing area; the *mikveh* was recovered here (Fig. 5). The bath was situated in a basement separated from the street by a front room with a well. The excavated *mikveh* consisted of a rectangular brick tank measuring 2.7 × 2.4m and *c.* 1.65m deep (Fig. 6). A wall subdivided the tank into two separate baths of 2.3 × 0.9m. The floor was covered with square red glazed tiles of 0.22 × 0.22m. The design, shape and construction techniques of the structure resembled in broad terms the drinking water reservoirs which were common utilitarian structures in 18th-century Amsterdam. Such brick tanks were dug behind or underneath many houses, lined with red-glazed floor-tiles which sealed the interior. They were closed by a barrel vault and served to collect rainwater for drinking.

This tank, however, also showed some different features. It was an open structure without the characteristic rounded top of the domestic reservoirs. Moreover, the interior was lined with white faience tiles (0.13 × 0.13m) of the sort usually used in kitchens or hearths (Fig. 7). Both baths had a water inlet *c.* 0.30m above the bottom; this indicated the approximate level when they were filled with 500 litres of water. The tank had no outlet because the high water table in the basement would have made it impossible to drain the basins; buckets or a pump must have been used instead. To achieve this, the basic design of the standard reservoir was adjusted: the floor was raised *c.* 0.30m by a deposit of sand, on top of which a second tiled floor, sloping down to one side, was laid. One bath was furnished at its lowest point with a wooden sump leading from the upper to the lower floor, in which the intake hose of a pump could be hung. Even though traces of steps or railings were absent, the presence of wooden crossbeams in the floor of each bath indicates that the *mikveh* probably had some sort of wooden stair (Fig. 8). A brick-lined pipe next to the bath probably carried the required pure water from the roof where it drained into the bath. Additional water could have been provided by a well located a few metres east of the *mikveh*. A circular hearth beside the bath was probably used to heat the water; it had a brick-lined rim on which a kettle could be placed, and a stokehole on one side. A similar heating system was recorded during

Amsterdam, Jonas Daniël Meijerplein
Mikveh, New Synagogue

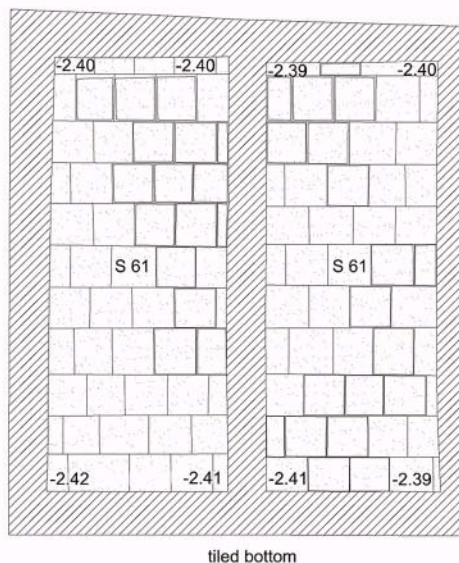
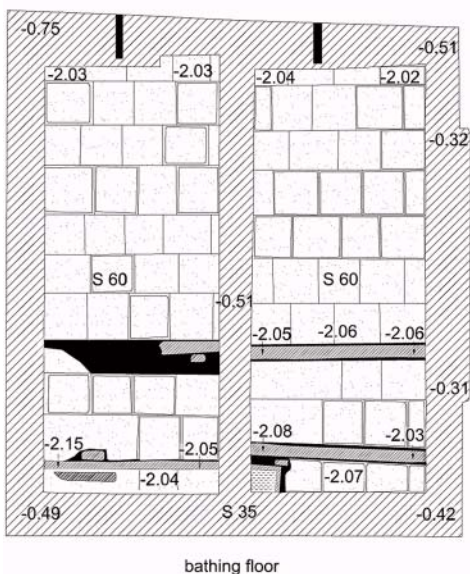
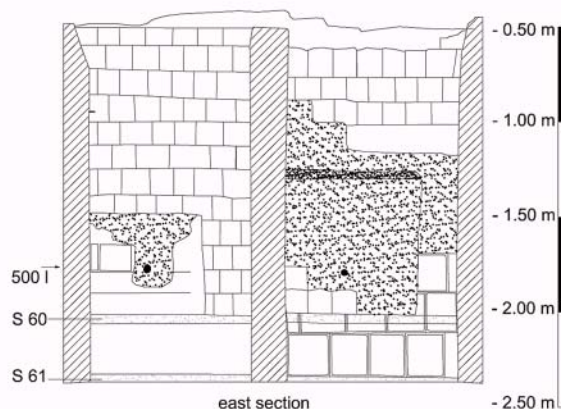
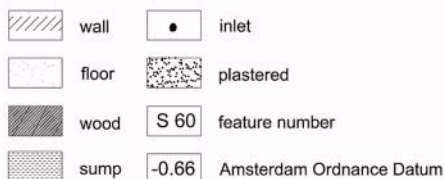


FIG. 5

The Amsterdam *mikveh*: features in plan and section (Bureau Monumenten & Archeologie).

the excavation of the early 18th-century tropical glasshouse of the Amsterdam botanical garden, the Hortus Botanicus, in 2002.²

The 18th-century New Synagogue *mikveh* is not the only one of its kind. Its architectural roots can be traced back to medieval Germany, where *mikveh'ot* were constructed from the 12th century onwards. Examples of these monumental structures remain at Worms, Speyer, Cologne and Friedberg.³ As groundwater was used to fill them, the baths were sometimes built as much as 25m

below the surface, as at Friedberg.⁴ In the 16th century *mikveh'ot* could be found in private basements, as well as being incorporated into synagogue complexes. In the 17th century the Ashkenazi Jews came to Amsterdam with this architectural background. A *mikveh* is a relatively rare feature in a Dutch archaeological context, although examples have been excavated in the past decades in Amersfoort, Utrecht and Gorinchem, as well as on a Dutch colonial site on St Eustatius.⁵ The 18th-century St Eustatius bath



FIG. 6

The Amsterdam *mikveh* looking towards the street: the *mikveh* is in the foreground, flanked by a hearth (right), with a well in the background (photograph, Bureau Monumenten & Archeologie).

and 19th-century example at Gorinchem represent the most common design: a rectangular structure with steps leading into it. Both the structure of 1671 visible in the Jewish Historical Museum and the excavated one resembled most closely the bathing structure of 1737 found in Amersfoort. This consisted of two adjoining baths that, in contrast with the Amsterdam *mikveh'ot*, were lined with marble. Both had stairs, only the underlying slope of which remained.

The discovery of a *mikveh* inside a synagogue complex is not a complete surprise, but in this case the archaeological evidence for its location, considered with historical information, raised some questions about the number of *mikveh'ot* and their positions within the complex. Documents give clues to the construction of a *mikveh* in the years 1750–52 on a site between the Great Synagogue and the New Synagogue — in other words next to the archaeological site. There is reason to believe that there were only two, one on the corner of the Nieuwe Amstelstraat dating to 1671, the other next to the New Synagogue dating

to 1750–52. When the latter was built it was decided that the new *mikveh* would serve the whole community, and use of the old one would be restricted to visitors. The excavated structure can be interpreted as the basin of the public *mikveh* of 1750–52, although initially the bathing facility would have been located next to the synagogue. Its position beside the building was much too restricted for a bath with its hearth and other fittings. At the same time, the New Synagogue was under construction and there was plenty of space in its basement. The location of the *mikveh* mentioned in the historical records therefore refers only to its entrance hall, while a side entrance in the wall of the synagogue gave access to the bath underneath the synagogue.

The Amsterdam *mikveh* was evidently a product of dual ancestry, combining Jewish tradition with Amsterdam craftsmanship. The masons, commissioned to build an impermeable structure, constructed what was essentially a water reservoir, but adjusted for use as a ritual bath.



FIG. 7

The Amsterdam *mikveh*, looking south-west (photograph, Bureau Monumenten & Archeologie).



FIG. 8

The Amsterdam *mikveh*: south-eastern bath, looking south-west, showing the floor structure. The tiled bottom is covered by a layer of sand, on top of which a second tiled floor was laid. Two cross-beams supported by wooden posts and a wooden sump (upper right corner) are incorporated in the second floor (photograph, Bureau Monumenten & Archeologie).

NOTES

- ¹ Van Voolen & Cahen 1987a; Van Agt 1974.
² Dautzenberg 2003.
³ Künzl 1992, 25–43.
⁴ Künzl 1992, 36.
⁵ Gorinchem: Dautzenberg & Floore 2000; St Eustatius: Gilmore 2006, 7–10; Amersfoort: Jayasena 2000, 3–4; Utrecht: Van Rooijen & Wynia 1998, 103–24.

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*Gemeente Amsterdam, Bureau Monumenten & Archeologie, Postbus 10718, 1001 ES Amsterdam,
 The Netherlands*

[j.gawronski@bma.dmb.amsterdam.nl; r.jayasena@bma.dmb.amsterdam.nl]