

NOTE ON THE RELATIONSHIP OF 'JEWS' COURT'
AND THE LINCOLN SYNAGOGUE¹

By HELEN ROSENAU

There are not extant in Europe many synagogues of the Middle Ages, and none in England, and so the problem whether 'Jews' House' in Lincoln was a synagogue requires further consideration. On the Continent, in Germany, Czechoslovakia and Poland there are synagogues constructed as halls with double naves having a row of pillars in the middle. The type with galleries is to be found in Spain—in Toledo and Cordoba. In France all medieval synagogues seem to have been destroyed or substantially altered, but there are in existence detailed records of the one in Carpentras.² These show it to have been a building of two stories of which some parts remained even after the rebuilding of 1741. The lower part of the building was the women's synagogue, the upper part the men's.

As is well known, the Jews were expelled from England in 1290. Though the Jewry of Lincoln was wealthy and of considerable importance, it probably numbered only about sixty householders.³

Reverting to the problem of the synagogue in Lincoln, the term 'Jews' Court' connects the building with pre-Expulsion Jewry,⁴ and implies both religious and civil associations.⁵ It is most unlikely that such a designation would have been invented after the expulsion of the Jews. That the synagogue also served as a court of law in the Middle Ages is

¹ This Note may be regarded as an appendix to Miss M. Wood's paper on 'Norman Domestic Architecture,' in *Arch. Journ.* xcii (1935), pp. 167 ff., but does not necessarily conform with the views of the authoress of that paper.—Ed.

² *Revue des Etudes Juives*, 12, 1886, pp. 50 seq.; pp. 227-235. Cp. also the notes on the synagogues in Rouen

and Cavaillon, *Gallia Judaica*, p. 624, *Revue des Etudes Juives*, *op. cit.*, p. 235, note 1.

³ Cp. A. M. Hyamsen, *A History of the Jews in England*, passim, London, 1908. C. Roth in *Medieval Lincoln Jewry and its Synagogue*, London, 1934, p. 26.

⁴ Cp. C. Roth, *op. cit.*, p. 20 seqq.

⁵ Cp. the synagogue in Prague.

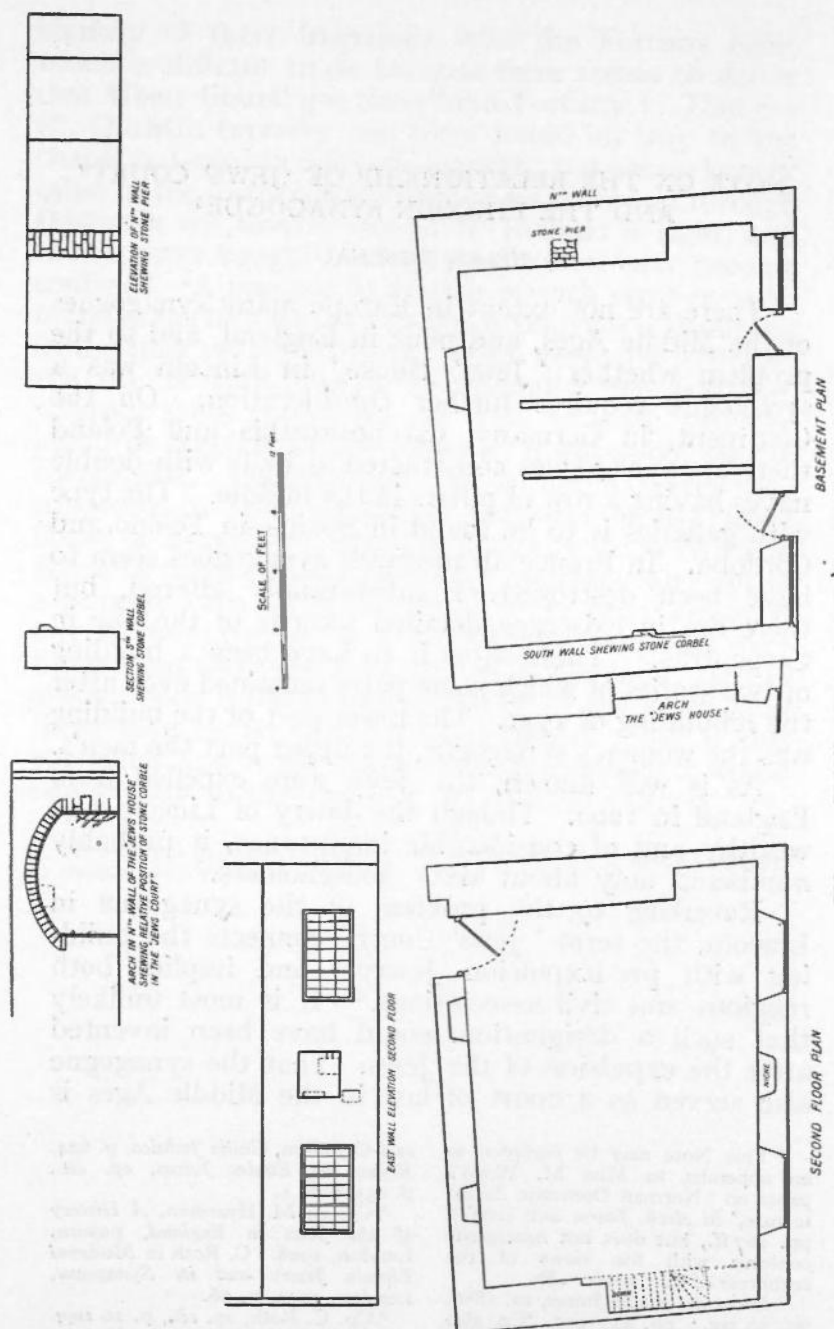


FIG. 1. PLANS, ETC., OF JEW'S COURT, LINCOLN

abundantly clear from the fact that a Jew who felt himself to have a grievance could interrupt the service in order to claim his rights. So here the relation between the synagogue and jurisdiction is evident.¹ Adjoining ' Jews' Court ' is ' Jews' House,' the northern entrance of which has been blocked, as can be seen by the joints inside the arch of the entrance. This was in all probability necessitated by the building of ' Jews' Court,' which must therefore be later than ' Jews' House.'

Most—indeed all but one—of the details of the original building have disappeared. The remaining one is a niche on the first floor in the middle of the eastern wall, directed towards Jerusalem—the usual arrangement for a synagogue in the Middle Ages. (Pls. i and ii.)

That the niche is not a simple cupboard is clear if one considers the fine original plastering of its back wall which is so regular that one must assume it was meant to be seen. Its measurements are approximately : $2\frac{1}{2}$ ft. above the floor, $2\frac{3}{4}$ ft. in actual height, 3 ft. wide outside, $2\frac{1}{4}$ ft. wide inside, 1 ft. 2 in. deep. The niche in its first state did not have sharp edges. These are due to modern restoration. As the floor has been raised about 18 ins., the original height of the niche would have made it still more suitable as a depository for the Scrolls of the Law.

The technique of the stonework is absolutely homogeneous, so that it is impossible to doubt that the niche is in its original position. Whether the top was rounded cannot be decided as the upper part has been totally reconstructed—a fact which has escaped the attention of Roth.² The plaster at the bottom of the niche is placed on a layer of reeds and contains traces of red brick which can also be found in the plaster on the back of the niche. This technique is typically medieval and adds weight to the arguments for the niche still being in its original state.

In the absence of further discoveries this building

¹ Cp. J. Elbogen, *Der Jüdische Gottesdienst*, Frankfurt, 1924, p. 453.
D. M. Shohet: *The Jewish Court*

in the Middle Ages, New York,

1931.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 20 seq.

stands as unique for the Middle Ages, but is easily explained by reference to the French synagogues previously mentioned. Even the five synagogues in one house in the Roman ghetto, built on various stories, are related to this type, and the same can be said of the 'high' synagogue, situated on the first floor of the Jewish Town Hall in Prague. Synagogues in Venice are also found on the first floor, so that the position of that in Lincoln need present no difficulties.

The placing of the niche on the long side of the building in Lincoln has a parallel in as early a synagogue as that in Dura-Europos dated A.D. 244, 245, where the niche is also the only architectural feature which, like that in Lincoln, is some distance above the floor.¹ (Pl. iii, A.)

The same arrangement is represented in a Spanish MS. of about 1300, the Haggadah of Sarajevo, where a niche used as the shrine of the scrolls is seen high above the floor.² (Pl. iii, B.) The windows are small, some of them barred. Even if the perspective as such is 'distorted' from the modern point of view, in the medieval way, the fact that the niche does not touch the floor cannot be doubted. Another proof that the building in Lincoln was a synagogue is offered by the fact that the windows must have been small as no trace of them can be seen now.³ It is therefore justifiable to assume that the 'Jews' House' in Lincoln was the ancient synagogue. The date of this synagogue must be placed between the building of Jews' House and the expulsion of the Jews from England.

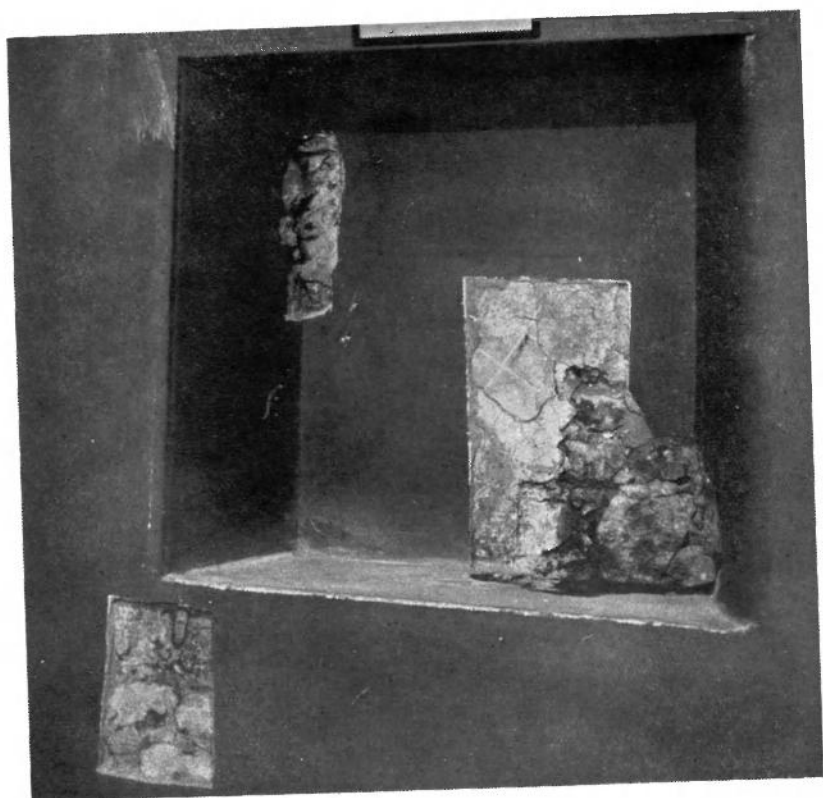
Another place in England connected with synagogue tradition is Moyses Hall, Bury St. Edmunds.⁴ In this case all the arguments are against such an assumption. The actual hall, which probably had four aisles originally, and of which only a part now exists, was a building of far bigger dimensions than could be

¹ Cp. *Revue Biblique*, 43, 1934, pp. 105 ff; 45, 1936, pp., 72 ff.

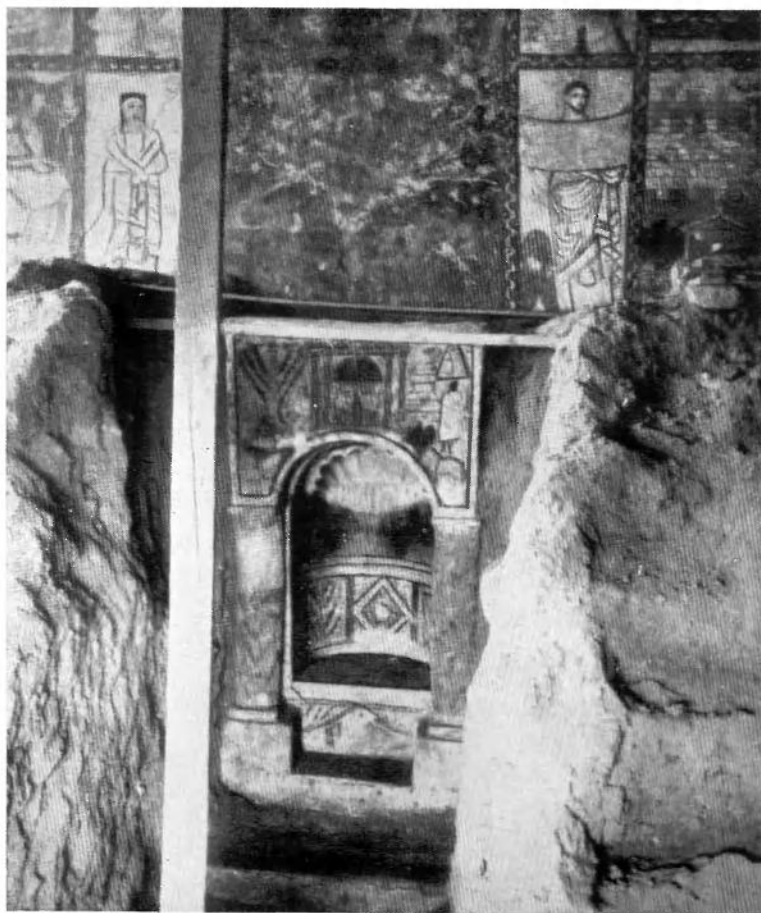
² The Haggadah of the British Museum, Or. 2884, shows also the shrine of the scrolls—a fact which has not been recognised by R. Krautheimer, *Mittelalterliche Synagogen*, Berlin, 1927, p. 94.

³ Cp. Carpentras, *Revue des Etudes Juives*, *op. cit.*, where the quarrel about the windows of the synagogue is fully dealt with—whereas 'Jews' House,' being a private mansion, had large windows.

⁴ Cp. *Jewish Chronicle*, 14 Feb., 1896.



NICHE IN JEWS' COURT, LINCOLN



NICHE IN THE SYNAGOGUE, DURA-EUROPOS

expected in a synagogue of a small Jewish community. Its niche, on the first floor, is not placed in the middle but on the south side of the east wall, that is to say not in the position typical for synagogue orientation. This type with many aisles has no parallel either in written or architectural synagogue tradition. The name of the hall—'Moyses'—could easily have belonged to a Christian.¹ One need only think of the well-known Abbot Samson of Bury, who expelled the Jews in 1190, but yet bore a Jewish name. The idea that Bury St. Edmund's Moyses Hall was a synagogue has therefore to be discarded.

It has been seen that 'Jews' Court' in Lincoln is a place of great interest in the history of Judaism, not only because it is an architectural representation of a medieval type of synagogue, now only known with its main features greatly altered or by means of records, but also because it shows the limits of the influence of antiquity on the architecture of the medieval synagogue. Whereas the ground-plan is derived from types related to Dura-Europos and Hammam-Lif, which have both their niches and their wall of orientation on the long side of the building, the elevation is purely medieval: the synagogue with more than one floor is not to be found in antiquity. At that time Jews were able to extend their buildings, but when their rights were restricted and a situation created which ultimately led to the enforcement of the 'Ghetto,' they developed amongst others a type of synagogue which placed the main room for worship on a higher level, and this, with its small windows, afforded a refuge when they were attacked. It expressed the need for a fortified centre of worship and communal life, and was an outcome of the Jews' precarious position in the Middle Ages.² It also solved the problem of how to make a small space serve

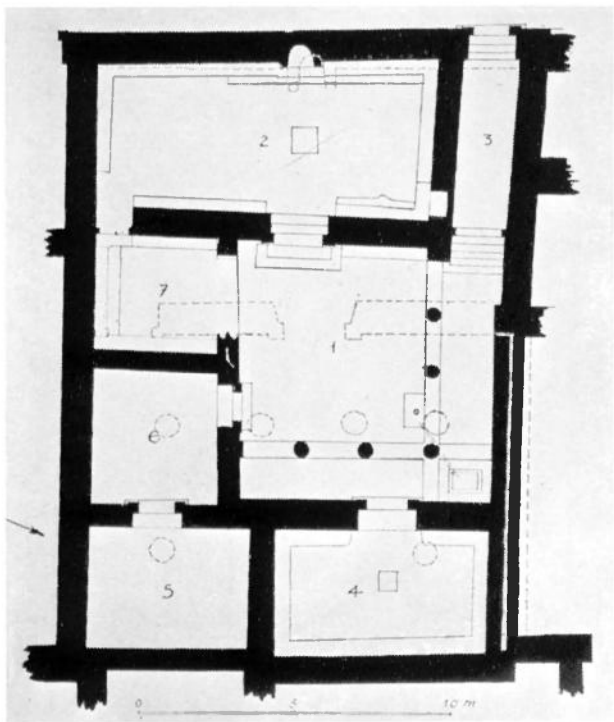
¹ Mr. A. W. Clapham stressed the importance of this point. F. Haes in his study (cp. above note) gives a list of Christians bearing the names of Moyse and Moese in Suffolk, Essex and Yorkshire, in the Middle Ages. Mr. Russel Crompton suggests the name was a surname.

² It is interesting to note that the Sephardi synagogues in Amsterdam and London are similar to the Palestinian type, having neither galleries nor niches—a point which will form the subject of another study.

as many purposes as possible, and thus reveals the pressure to which Jews were frequently subjected in the Middle Ages.¹ In this connection the synagogue in Lincoln contributes to the history of the medieval Jew.

NOTE.—The investigation of Jew's Court and the removal of some of the modern plaster were kindly permitted by the Lincoln Diocesan Trust, through Mr. A. G. Croll.

¹ Cp. J. Parkes, *The Conflict of the Synagogue and the Church*, London, 1934.



A. PLAN OF SYNAGOGUE, DURA-EUPOPOS
(From the *Revue Biblique*)

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B. HAGGADAH OF SARAJEVO

PLATE III.