

La Maison
SUBLIME



« Que cette maison soit sublime »
Book of Kings (I, 9, 8)

From April 30th 2022
in Rouen

PRESS KIT

Visit

La Maison sublime

The oldest Jewish monument in France

www.visitezlamaisonsublime.fr



Press release
Friday, April 29, 2022

LA MAISON SUBLIME

Opening to the public of the oldest Jewish monument in France

For Nicolas Mayer-Rossignol, President of Métropole Rouen Normandie, Laurence Renou, Vice-President of Métropole Rouen Normandie for Culture and Christine de Cintré, Metropolitan Councillor for Tourism and Rouen European Capital of Culture, President of Rouen Normandie Tourisme et Congrès: « Métropole Rouen Normandie has worked alongside the Ministry of Justice and la Maison Sublime de Rouen Association for many years to reopen this exceptional venue, the oldest Jewish monument in France. This monument beneath Rouen's Palais de Justice - a jewel of Gothic architecture - has been saved thanks to the assistance of a significant number of patrons. By opening Rouen's Maison Sublime to the public, a part of our common history is once again open to everyone: that of Rouen's Jewish community in the Middle Ages. »

August 1976: paving work was under way in the courtyard of Rouen's Palais de Justice. While digging, construction workers heard a thud. They discovered a stone wall. These stones were a distinctive size, leaving no room for doubt. They belonged to a 12th century Romanesque building. Excavations began, and carved inscriptions confirmed its history: a 12th century Jewish monument, the oldest known Jewish monument in France. Following this incredible discovery, archaeologists, historians and experts from across the world came together to try and uncover more information about this site.

40 years after its discovery and around 9 centuries after it was built, this monument - La Maison Sublime - has still not revealed all its secrets. Was it a rabbinical school, a place of prayer, a home? The mystery continues.

Various papers and publications have been produced following scientific research and investigation. There are some hypotheses. Everyone agrees that this monument is crucial evidence of the scale of the Jewish community in Rouen in the Middle Ages, but also the persecution experienced at this time throughout Europe.

"Que cette maison soit sublime." Hebrew graffiti visible today on the walls of the monument offers further evidence of the past, of adults and children within its walls. In what situation were these carvings made? What do they tell us about the people who made them? What did they aim to say? Were they sitting behind a desk to study, or sat on the floor, trapped, to avoid persecution? So many mysteries, which leaves everyone free to imagine the life and history which took place in this Maison Sublime.



To keep its history alive, a major conservation campaign was launched in 2012, supported by the Ministry of Justice and La Maison Sublime de Rouen Association. Many patrons have played a part to help protect this site, which has struggled with problems related to humidity.

From April 30, the site opens its doors to visitors. The public will be guided (in small groups) beneath the former Parlement de Normandie, the current Rouen Palais de Justice, in the very heart of the city's historic district. This means everyone can finally discover this unique monument, which has not yet revealed all its secrets.

Rouen's Maison Sublime is only available for pre-booked tours:

General public guided tour

Saturdays at 10:30am and 2:30pm.

Additional tours during school holidays (zone B), Tuesdays and Thursdays at 2:30pm.

Duration: 1 hour - Price: €9/person Reduced price: €7.50/person Free for under 6s.

Gauge very limited, booked inavoidable.

Book at: www.visitezlamaisonsublime.fr or at the Joan of Arc Historial reception.

Adult groups and schools guided tour

Tour slots are dedicated to groups and schools on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Information and booking at: reservation@visitezlamaisonsublime.fr – 02 35 52 48 02 and information@visitezlamaisonsublime.fr

Group guided tour price: €7.50/person

School guided tour price: €5/student.

Guided tours can be organized in all languages.

All tour information is available on the website: www.visitezlamaisonsublime.fr

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ROUEN'S MAISON SUBLIME

DISCOVERY OF THE BUILDING

On 11 August 1976, a major archaeological discovery interrupted paving repair work which had recently started in the courtyard of the Palais de Justice. Site machinery broke through the vault of a Romanesque cellar, revealing an initial monument beneath the forecourt of the Palais de Justice. It was decided to carry out a systematic survey of the entire courtyard due to this discovery. Two days later, on Friday, 13 August 1976, a second Romanesque building was discovered. This building - even larger than the first one - would later be named la Maison Sublime.

Archaeologists started a thorough set of excavations. They described and recorded their discoveries, attempting to determine the history of the monument and to answer the following questions: When was it built? How was it built? Where were the stones from? How was it used?

The issue is particularly crucial, as historians have long-known that the Jewish neighbourhood was previously located at the site of the current Palais de Justice.

In a book published four months earlier but not translated into French, Professor Norman Golb identified a *yeshiva* on Rue aux Juifs.

Yeshiva: A *Yeshiva* is a school where the Talmud is studied.

Along with the Torah, the Talmud is one of the fundamental texts of Judaism. Compiled in the 5th century, it contains the rabbinical interpretation of all topics mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. It covers prayers, rites, celebrations, weddings, law and justice, food laws...

As the archaeological excavations continued, new hypotheses emerged. Many historians took part in discussions to determine the purpose of la Maison Sublime.

Archaeological excavations and different hypotheses

During an initial excavation in August and September 1976, the north, west and south walls of la Maison Sublime were unearthed. The staircase of the Palais de Justice's Court of Appeal had to be dismantled to continue investigations and access the east wall in the following year.

The first discoveries uncovered a beautiful Romanesque building in cut stone. The building's location - in the heart of the medieval Jewish neighbourhood - made this discovery even more interesting, as the excavations soon revealed a series of Hebrew graffiti carved into the walls.

Why (do we call it) la Maison Sublime?

The monument's name is taken from some Hebrew graffiti discovered on one of the walls of the lower room. It is a quotation from the Book of Kings (I, 9, 8): "And this house shall be sublime until the Rock (the King of Israel) has mercy upon Zion".

A second hypothesis on the purpose of the monument emerged from these inscriptions, alongside that of a *yeshiva*. Some historians champion the idea that la Maison Sublime was a synagogue.

Finally, based on the results of excavations and various architectural comparisons, a third hypothesis was put forward - a private home.

Far from concluding, debates between proponents of these three hypotheses (rabbinical school, synagogue and private home) would continue long after the end of archaeological excavations. Neither the results of these excavations nor written materials make it possible to choose one of these different hypotheses.

Yet the discovery of the monument is no less exceptional. La Maison Sublime offers major archaeological evidence of the history of medieval Judaism, and thus is a valuable piece of heritage

Site conservation and public opening

On the initiative of Jean Lecanuet, then mayor of Rouen, the remains of la Maison Sublime were classified as an official Historic Monument on 1 July 1977. This meant they could be protected and restored.

Once excavations were complete, an archaeological crypt was designed by Georges Duval, chief architect of Historic Monuments. This crypt aimed to preserve the remains whilst allowing the monument to be visited.

The monument was unveiled on 13 October 1980 and opened to the public for the first time.

At the end of the 20th century, new archaeological discoveries were made in the former medieval Jewish neighbourhood. Two other stone houses dating from the same period as la Maison Sublime were uncovered. In 1982, a building was discovered underneath the Tribunal de Grande Instance, to the south of Rue aux Juifs. A few years later, in 1985, another Romanesque building was found beneath the east wing of the Palais de Justice.

The Palais de Justice, a masterpiece of Gothic architecture

La Maison Sublime is located beneath the courtyard of the Palais de Justice. This true masterpiece of Gothic architecture was built at the end of the Middle Ages in the very location of the city's former Jewish neighbourhood. Over the centuries, the building was extended several times. Before being the site of the Palais de Justice, the monument was, in turn, the seat of the Echiquier de Normandie, then the Parlement de Normandie.

Visiting la Maison Sublime means entering the courtyard of this remarkable piece of history to discover, hidden beneath the paving, a building with exceptional historical significance.



THE OLDEST JEWISH MONUMENT IN FRANCE

The monument discovered in 1976 is a Romanesque building dating from the early 12th century, which makes it the oldest known Jewish monument in France. Constructed entirely in limestone from the Seine Valley, this building was found around twenty metres back from the Rue aux Juifs, and was located in a courtyard or garden.

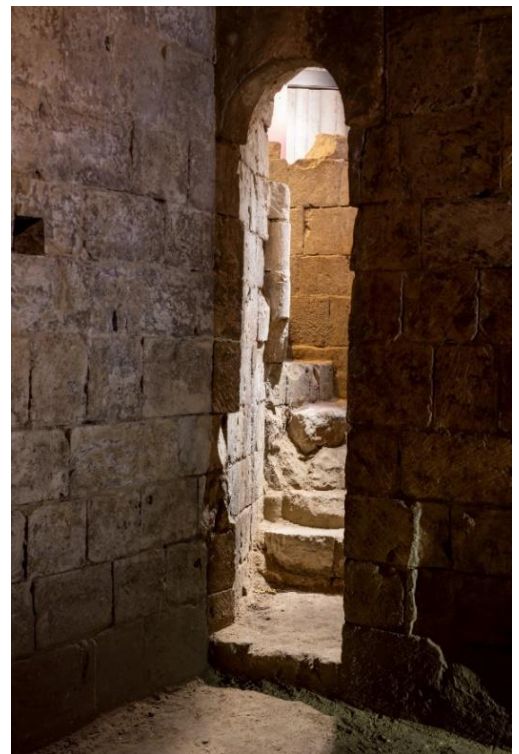
Description of the monument

La Maison Sublime is a rectangular building around 14 metres long and 9.5 metres wide. Due to the thickness of the walls, it seems likely that this building had at least 3 floors: a basement, a ground floor and a first floor. Now, just the lower room and remains of the ground floor walls are still visible.

All the walls (except the east wall) have flat buttresses surrounded by columns sitting on carved bases.

The north wall has 4 bay windows to allow light through to the lower room. At the north-west point, a corner turret contains a spiral staircase to move between the different floors of the building.

Finally the south wall, the monument's primary facade, features the building's two most beautiful column bases. On either side of the staircase leading to the lower room, there is a column base depicting two single-headed lion cubs and another with a two-headed dragon. Some see an illustration of a Biblical reference from Psalm 91 in these sculptures: "thou shalt tread upon the lion and adder: the young lion and the dragon shalt thou trample under feet".



The lower room is found two metres below the level of the medieval floor. Around 3 metres tall, it was not vaulted, but simply covered with a floor. The floor was likely made of beaten earth.

The medieval floor

In an urban setting, when a monument is destroyed or collapses, it is common to spread the debris across the floor, add a layer of earth to stabilise and level out the land, then rebuild on top. This means the level of the floor gradually rises over the centuries. In the case of la Maison Sublime, the medieval floor is located 2.5 metres below the current level of the courtyard of the Palais de Justice.

Hebrew graffiti

16 examples of Hebrew graffiti were found in this lower room. Found on the north and south inner walls, as well as the corner turret, they refer to the names of people (Josué, Isaac, Jacob, Raphaël). Other graffiti indicates the hope that "God's Torah exists forever" or reference a quote from the Book of Kings (I, 9, 8): "May this house be sublime".

This graffiti is particularly important, as it confirms that the monument did indeed belong to Rouen's Jewish community.

Studies of this graffiti - as well as that of the entire monument - have not determined the use of la Maison Sublime. Was it a synagogue, a rabbinical school or a private home? No one can say.



Uncertain use

It is difficult for historians to identify community buildings, largely due to their reallocation following expulsion of the Jews.

The same applies to la Maison Sublime. Archaeological discoveries confirm that the lower room of the monument was completely backfilled around 1306, the very year when Rouen's Jews were expelled from the city and saw their property confiscated. This change could coincide with new use of the building.

The date of destruction of la Maison Sublime also raises a question. Sources are not consistent on whether destruction took place in 1429, when the market at the Place de la Cathédrale was transferred to the Clos aux Juifs, or around 1550, when the Parlement de Normandie was extended east.

But one thing is certain - la Maison Sublime is the oldest Jewish monument in France. It is also major evidence of part of the city's history: medieval Rouen Judaism.

ROUEN'S JEWISH COMMUNITY IN THE MIDDLE AGES

In Rouen, the Jewish community is closely linked to Rue aux Juifs. This street, which was first mentioned in 1116, crosses the Jewish neighbourhood from east to west.

The Jewish neighbourhood is located in the very heart of the medieval city. It covers three parishes: Saint-Herbland, Notre-Dame-de-la-Ronde and Saint-Lô. The Jews were not the only people living in this neighbourhood.

Community institutions, like the synagogue, should have played an important role there. The cemetery is located outside the neighbourhood; at Mons Judeorum, in the north-west of the city.

Relations between Jews and Christians

It is difficult to precisely determine the date when the first Jews arrived in Rouen. Whilst some mention their potential presence from the Gallo-Roman period, historic sources cannot actually prove the presence of Jews in Rouen until the 11th century.

From the 11th century to the 14th century, the Jews and Christians mixed together on the streets and in market squares. They traded with each other and often had good neighbourly relations. The Jews played a key role in business in the city, as well as a major part in its economic development: they were involved in exchanges with neighbouring regions, and were also involved in longer distance trade.

The relations between Jews and Christians - which were harmonious for a long time - started to worsen at the end of the 11th century. At the time of the departure for the First Crusade in 1096, Rouen's Jews experienced particularly violent persecution. Those who refused to convert to Christianity were massacred, their property pillaged and their homes and community buildings destroyed.

In the 12th century, the Jews enjoyed an improved status, but the situation worsened again during the 13th century. The Jews saw their freedom of movement and thus trade start to be gradually restricted. There were many constraints: a ban on usury (money lending with interest), a ban on living in the countryside, a requirement to wear a distinctive sign... The expulsion of Jews from France by Philip IV in 1306 was the culmination of this policy against the Jewish community.

An influential community

Rouen is an important place in the influence of Jewish culture. Overseen by Rabbi Yossi, the Rouen *yeshiva* acquired great renown. He and his family created a new Jewish community in London in around 1135. A sister community to Rouen, it had close ties with the community to which it owed its existence for years.

More generally, many Jewish scholars (including Rashbam and Abraham Ibn Ezra) came to Rouen to stay or settle down. They all contributed to intellectual exchanges and made Rouen's academy one of the most famous in Northern France. Many rabbinical works of literature were produced in this lively cultural context.

LA MAISON SUBLIME - A MAJOR RESTORATION CAMPAIGN

Many restoration projects were carried out to save the monument and improve tour conditions. Overseen by Antoine Madalénat, chief architect of historic monuments, the works were supported through funding from the government, local authorities (Normandy Region, Métropole Rouen Normandie, Department of Seine-Maritime, City of Rouen), the generosity of donors via a national call for donations by the Fondation du Patrimoine, as well as donations from the Fondation du Crédit Agricole, the Edmond J. Safra Foundation in Geneva, the Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah and the Regional Delegation of the Fondation du Patrimoine. Works were completed with scenography, produced by the agency Point de vues.

Restoration and promotion works for la Maison Sublime were supported by:

The Ministry of Justice - contracting authority and main contributor

And its partners:

La Maison Sublime de Rouen Association (LMSR)

Local authorities

The Normandy Region
the Department of Seine-Maritime
Métropole Rouen Normandie
the City of Rouen

Private partners

the Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah
the Edmond J. Safra Foundation
the Fondation du Patrimoine
the Fondation Crédit Agricole – Crédit Agricole Normandie-Seine

As well as 195 donors through the national call for donations by the Fondation du Patrimoine



METROPOLE ROUEN NORMANDIE'S REC

Métropole Rouen Normandie's Régie des Équipements Culturels (REC) advocates for iconic monuments and sites in the Rouen metropolitan area. Created in 2014, the organisation now manages five sites: the Aître Saint-Maclou, the Château de Robert le Diable, the Rouen Donjon, the Joan of Arc Historial and Rouen's Maison Sublime. It aims to bring each of its locations, their history and what they represent for everyone to life.

Through a cultural offering of tours, events, workshops and conferences in each location, the REC is committed to a cultural and educational initiative for a large audience, both adults and children.



LA MAISON SUBLIME ASSOCIATION

La Maison Sublime de Rouen Association was founded in March 2007 to safeguard, conserve, restore, promote and reopen this monument to the public, and thus help improve understanding of the history of Jewish people in Rouen and Normandy.

More information: www.lamaisonsublime.fr

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A document created by Métropole Rouen Normandie accompanies the guided tour. It was created by the Métropole Rouen Normandie Culture Department, Heritage Service, in collaboration with the “Maison Sublime de Rouen” association, Jacques-Sylvain Klein, Henry Decaëns, Guy Pessiot.
From DES SIGNES Studio





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