

University of Massachusetts Amherst

From the Selected Works of Neil A. Silberman

2010

Rewriting Jewish History

Neil A. Silberman, *University of Massachusetts - Amherst*



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/neil_silberman/23/

By Neil Asher Silberman

Rewriting Jewish History

Recent excavations have transformed our understanding of the lives of European Jews during the Middle Ages

For centuries, the Jews have been one of Europe's most widely persecuted minorities—conventional wisdom identifies them as a well-defined network of communities set off from the rest of the population by official exclusion, their religious laws, and a narrow range of occupations and intellectual pursuits. Yet a new trend in archaeology is addressing some key questions about Jewish life in Europe through the ages. When were Jewish communities founded in various cities? How did they—or did they—distinguish themselves from the general population? Have Jewish religious customs and symbols changed? What can Jewish archaeology teach us about the condition of ethnic minorities in the Middle Ages and today?

According to Samuel Gruber, director of the Syracuse, New York–based International Survey of Jewish Monuments, the stereotypical “otherness” of European Jews in the Middle Ages is based on written sources (both Jewish and Christian) whose clear-cut theological agendas mask the true complexity of Jewish life. “Most of the medieval Jewish sources about the Jews are rabbinic writings,” he says, “either legal rulings, religious commentary, or pious poetry. Christian documentary sources were usually influenced by church teachings and were often biased and polemical. All of these sources are generalized and ahistoric, in the sense that they describe



A 14th-century French manuscript depicts Jews wearing characteristic pointed caps.

Jews and Judaism as something fixed.” The sources describe religious ideals rather than day-to-day realities—unswerving faithfulness to Mosaic Law on the Jewish side, and unrelenting hostility toward Jewish unbelievers from the Christian side. This shaped a vision of the Jews as set apart from mainstream medieval Christendom, which came to be identified with a largely uniform feudal system characterized by Christian religious art, architecture,

armor, tapestries, half-timbered urban dwellings, and coats of arms. Jews, as well as Muslims, Roma, heretics, visionaries, beggars, wanderers, migrant workers, and even the rural worshippers of the traditional nature cults of Europe—were placed emphatically on the outside.

But archaeological protection laws in Europe over the last 60 years have helped reshape our vision of medieval society. The physical devastation of World War II laid bare areas that had for centuries been crowded with standing structures. Beginning in the 1950s, the nations of western Europe funded large-scale urban digs and enacted strict requirements for archaeological excavations before reconstruction could begin, a trend that has continued as development has accelerated in the last 20 years. Organizations such as France's National Institute for Preventative Archaeology (INRAP) have employed thousands of archaeologists to undertake tens of thousands of excavations, bringing to light a huge new body of data about the archaeology of France from the Paleolithic to the twentieth century.

Like cultural resource management digs in the United States, the location of these excavations is often determined by development projects and accidental discoveries. They have unearthed previously unknown histories of forgotten groups gleaned from house walls, food remains, graffiti, and other discoveries, rather

(Continued on page 58)

(Continued from page 18)

than from the “official” records of secular or ecclesiastical elites. According to Paul Salmona of INRAP and Laurence Sigal-Klagsblad, director of the Jewish Museum of Art and History in Paris, the archaeological rediscovery of Jewish sites throughout France contributes to nothing less than “a rewriting of the national history.” Archaeologists across Europe are also demonstrating the diversity and cultural interactions of members of Jewish communities with “mainstream” medieval society.

This is not just a matter of Jewish interest. According to Max Polonovski, chief curator of Jewish Heritage for the French Ministry of Culture, the main goal of this emerging trend is not merely to address the veracity of medieval texts, but to “discover ways of life, intercommunal relationships in the heart of medieval cities, and to trace social changes over the centuries.”

For the last four years, Sven Schütte and his team of archaeologists from Cologne’s Museum of History and Urban Archaeological Service have been digging the cold, muddy soil of City Hall Square for the remains of one of medieval Europe’s largest and most ancient Jewish quarters, the Judengasse or “Jews’ Alley.” Just south of the city’s thirteenth-century Gothic cathedral, Schütte’s excavations have revealed four superimposed synagogues, shops, dwellings, and a ritual bath or *mikveh*, evidence of a continuous Jewish community from the early fourth century A.D. through 1424, when Cologne’s Jews were expelled by imperial decree.

Earlier historians assumed that there may have been individual Jews in the Roman colony of Claudia Ara Agrippinensium, as Cologne was known from A.D. 50 to 459, but that an organized Jewish community was established much later. Schütte’s work suggests that the earliest of the four synagogues was built when there was still a Roman presence in the city, demonstrating that the Jewish community was not a relatively late, alien arrival, but was established at the



An early 17th-century manuscript shows Jews being expelled from Frankfurt, Germany.

Although Jews were sometimes segregated in walled communities, archaeologists across Europe are beginning to show that this was not always the case, and that Jewish and Christian cultures were more interdependent than previously thought.

same time—or even before—the official institution of Christianity in the fourth century A.D.

Close to the synagogue, Schütte’s team has also identified a hospital, bakery, and cluster of private houses, from which they recovered nearly 43,000 artifacts and some 120,000 samples of flora and fauna. According to Schütte, there is virtually nothing to indicate an especially Jewish character to the architecture, glass, or pottery, though the cesspits show some interesting differences between Jewish and Christian medieval households.

The Jewish taboo against eating pork is in evidence—just 1.5 percent of the animal bones in the Jewish area, compared with 40–50 percent in the rest of the city. And the residents of the Judengasse had other distinctive dietary traits that are hard to explain with Jewish law. Archaeozoologist Hubert Berke noted a high proportion of wild deer and birds that were nearly extinct in the Middle Ages, a greater variety of fish than eaten by the rest of the population, and the bones of hares and rabbits from dishes that were consumed throughout the city but are considered non-kosher today.

But the material culture of the Judengasse is almost indistinguish-

able from that of the rest of the city. Its residents were only different in diet, presumably religious beliefs, and, based on illustrated manuscripts, clothing and hairstyle, but not in their everyday life. “There does not seem to have been such an extreme separation between Christians and Jews as formerly thought,” says Schütte. “Maybe our historical image is influenced too greatly by the common picture of the much more recent East European shtetl with its narrowness and ‘typical’ appearance of its inhabitants. I have the impression that by no means was this the case in medieval Cologne.”

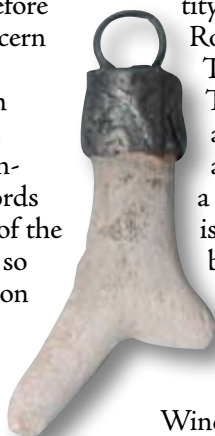
All too often, the excavators of Jewish sites in Europe—the overwhelming majority of whom are not Jewish and are unfamiliar with Jewish culture—depend on rabbis and Jewish religious officials to identify distinctively Jewish remains. Though this may seem reasonable, it represents a dangerous kind of circular logic. No culture remains static for centuries, and dependence on modern rabbinical expertise can blind us to expressions of Jewishness that are not immediately recognizable today.

“Just look at what happened at Jewbury,” says Polonovski of the French Ministry of Culture, referring

to a section of the British city of York occupied by Jews between 1190 and 1260. Archaeologists who carried out emergency excavations at the site of a proposed supermarket in the early 1980s claimed they had uncovered a medieval Jewish cemetery, but the British rabbinical authorities would have none of it. Not only were there no signs of tombstones—a practice now scrupulously enforced by orthodox Jewish practice—but many of the coffins were fastened with iron nails and had iron fittings, further violations of orthodoxy. Also, many were oriented in an uncharacteristic southwest-northeast direction, instead of with the head facing Jerusalem. Thus the rabbinical court ruled that it was only a “remote possibility” that the graves were Jewish, and therefore the excavation was of no concern to them.

Yet an archaeological team led by Jane Lilley of the York Archaeological Trust was convinced based on archival records that these graves were those of the medieval Jewish community, so they began intensive excavation and analysis of the remains. Remarkably, when reports suggested that the Jewish burials were similar to those of the rest of York’s medieval population, and mentioned diseases and injuries, the Chief Rabbi of England, Immanuel Jakobovits, changed his mind. He requested an immediately halt to the project, declaring that the deceased were under his spiritual, and therefore legal, jurisdiction, and that “whatever the scientific and historical loss, I hope that you and the general public will appreciate our paramount concern for the reverence due to the mortal remains which once bore the incomparable hallmark of the Divine image and which, we believe, have a right to rest undisturbed.” The bones from Jewbury were handed over to the rabbinical authorities for reburial before the analysis was complete.

Amulets found in a mid-14th-century Jewish grave in Tàrrega, Spain, below, and a gold ring and a seal with star and crescent symbols, below right, both found in Regensburg, Germany, are only some of the artifacts being connected with Jews in the archaeological record of medieval Europe.



The excavation of medieval Jewish cemeteries across Europe continues to be a particularly sensitive issue; York is just one example of how archaeology can uncover different expressions of Jewish identity. At Regensburg in Germany; Rouen and Languedoc in France; Toledo, Lucena, Barcelona, and Tàrrega in Spain; and Prague and Budapest in Central Europe, archaeologists are uncovering a variety of expressions of Jewish identity and the boundaries between Jewish and Christian cultures.

At Regensburg, for example, excavations under the direction of Sylvia Codreanu-Windauer of the Bavarian Heritage Department have uncovered the main communal structures of the medieval city’s Judengasse—synagogue, mikveh, public buildings, and private dwellings, all with the same architectural style and masonry techniques used in the rest of the city. The area is not conspicuously marked off from the urban plan as a kind of ghetto. But there was a fascinating find hinting at a distinct expression of Jewish cultural identity that is forgotten today, but was characteristic of its time and place. Some twelfth-century Jewish official seals of the Regensburg community bore the distinctive symbol of star and crescent (later associated with Muslim and some Christian communities and especially known for its use in contemporary coats of arms). Archaeologists found the same



heraldic symbol on a personal ring—perhaps as a sign of an office of the Regensburg Jewish community.

Does this range of variations and localized habits of Jewish customs suggest that the boundary between medieval European Jews and Christians may not have been so clear? Did that boundary become more rigid with time? The answer might lie in the long-range perspective provided by urban archaeology. France in particular has seen many excavations of medieval Jewish sites and cemeteries that reflect an evolving economic and cultural symbiosis—marked by outbreaks of anti-Jewish violence and expulsions—involving Christians and Jews that shaped the identities and customs of both communities.

For example, on the basement walls of an eleventh-century Romanesque building on the rue aux Juifs, “Street of Jews,” in Rouen is Hebrew graffiti including Biblical names, a possible reference to the “Torah of the Lord,” and the phrase *beit elyon* (“the exalted house”). Yet it is built in a manner identical to the contemporary Benedictine monasteries of the region. As

first suggested by Norman Golb of the University of Chicago, the building may have served as a regional rabbinical academy, an institution of Jewish learning in an age of monks and monasteries. Such similarities between Jewish religious learning and Christian monasticism had never before been identified archaeologically. The realms of medieval European rabbis and abbots may have both embodied the same intense scribal and scriptural preoccupations of contemporary society as a whole.

Archaeologists across France are now revealing what seems to be a gradual tendency, from the early Middle Ages to the eighteenth century, toward more rigid Jewish-Christian cultural differentiation. Christian rulers imposed increasing restrictions and Jewish communities responded by closing in on themselves. Historians have long noted the imposition of more draconian edicts toward the end of the Middle Ages, but archaeologists are now uncovering not only greater spatial separation between the groups, but also evidence that over time the material culture of Jewish communities became more recognizably "Jewish" in a modern orthodox sense.

This trend is typified by the establishment of clear demarcation of compulsory Jewish quarters in the region around Avignon in the fifteenth century. François Guyonnet of the Archaeological Service of the Department of Vaucluse analyzed the changing urban layouts of four communities whose Jews were protected by papal and episcopal authority, and therefore escaped expulsions and absorbed Jewish immigrants from other parts of southern France. Guyonnet found evidence of the spatial separation of Jews within cities in the form of inward-facing houses and traces of easily closable entrance and exit gates. The separation of Jews into a "ghetto," derived from the Venetian word for "foundry" (one of the first legally enclosed Jewish quarters was located on an island that also held a foundry), can be seen not as an unchanging reality of medieval Europe, but as a datable archaeological phenomenon.

(Continued on page 65)

As Seen On TV!

Ease of use, peace of mind.

Be able to bathe safely, without worry with a Premier Walk-In Bath.

Independence and security are only a phone call away. If you or a loved one struggle taking a bath, talk to us at Premier Care in Bathing about our extensive range of walk-in baths.

- Enjoy a relaxing bath again, without the fear of slipping or falling.
- The walk-in door feature allows easy access and exiting.
- **Hydrovessant** jets soothe away your aches and pains.

☒ **Yes! Please send me a FREE COLOR BROCHURE about Premier Care Walk-In Baths.**

Name

Telephone ()

Address

City State Zip

Send to: Premier Care in Bathing Inc., 2330 South Nova Rd., South Daytona, Florida 32119

1617070

"Transform your bathroom and transform your life."

~ Karen Grassle

CALL NOW • TOLL FREE

1-800-578-2899

SOURCE CODE 1617070

Make Room for the Memories.

An adventure of historic proportion is waiting for you—at two living-history museums that explore America's beginnings. Board replicas of colonial ships. Grind corn in a Powhatan Indian village. Try on English armor inside a palisaded fort. Then, join Continental Army soldiers at their encampment for a firsthand look at the Revolution's end. Don't forget your camera. Because the history here is life size. And your memories will be even bigger!

JAMESTOWN & YORKTOWN
SETTLEMENT & VICTORY CENTER

1-888-593-4682 or www.historyisfun.org

Save close to 20% on a combination ticket to both museums.

Archaeology Travel Adventures

EXCEPTIONAL SCHOLARS

**BOLIVIA'S
ANDES & ALTIPLANO**

Archaeology, History, & Culture
with optional trip extension to Peru

Scholar: Dr. Axel Nielsen

March 2011 (exact date to be announced)

**CIVILIZATIONS OF
CENTRAL MEXICO**

The Aztecs & Their Predecessors

Scholars: Dr. David Carballo & Jennifer Carballo

June 8–18, 2011

CROW CANYON
ARCHAEOLOGICAL CENTER
Near Mesa Verde in Southwest CO

800.422.8975
www.crowcanyon.org/travel

CST 2059347-50

(Continued from page 61)

Likewise, familiar Jewish dietary customs appear clearly in the archaeological record only in this later period. Although clear evidence for the pork taboo was found in Cologne, the extent of the full range of dietary regulations is unclear and has always been assumed rather than proved. Though rabbinic documents testify to fully articulated laws, only further analysis of kitchen and food refuse from across Europe will determine how scrupulously they were kept through time. For example, recent INRAP excavations conducted by Claire Decomps and Lonny Borada in Metz, in far northeastern France, where well-to-do Jewish immigrants from Germany arrived in the seventeenth century, discovered pottery specially marked in Hebrew to separate milk and meat.

European Jewish archaeology has also become a battleground between archaeologists and modern ultra-orthodox Jewish factions who claim blanket jurisdiction over the remains of all medieval communities who identified themselves—or were identified—as Jewish.

In the last five years, ultra-orthodox groups, such as the Central Rabbinical Congress of the U.S. and Canada, based in Brooklyn, and the self-styled *Atra Kadisha* (“Sacred Places Committee”) from Israel, have insisted on the complete inviolability of Jewish graves and forced the termination of legally authorized excavations of ancient Jewish cemeteries in Toledo, Barcelona, and Malta, even in cases of immediate danger from erosion, vandalism, or planned construction.

This uncompromising interpretation of Jewish religious law against even the most respectful removal and reburial of Jewish graves is a matter of controversy even within Israel, where archaeologists and religious experts have pointed to a wide latitude granted by rabbinical rulings over the centuries. Yet hardline groups such as *Atra Kadisha* have held fast to an inflexible religious interpretation, asserting themselves across Europe



In medieval Europe Jews were often made to wear symbols that identified them as Jewish, including the white patches on their clothes in a 14th-century French manuscript.

and demanding that their view be recognized by local Jewish communities as final and definitive. Representatives of these groups have taken it upon themselves to claim the long-deceased members of medieval Jewish communities as their own spiritual wards. But would those medieval Jews, whose customs may have varied greatly from their self-appointed religious protectors from Brooklyn, even recognize these groups as their kin?

Perhaps the most troubling case of this phenomenon took place near Tàrraga in southern Catalonia, at Roquetas, which was excavated in 2007 by Anna Colet Marcé and Oriol Saula of the Regional Museum of Urgell. The archaeologists were called to perform emergency excavations at a residential building site where human remains thought to be from the Spanish Civil War had been found. As the excavation proceeded, it became clear that it was a large medieval cemetery. Research in the archives of Tàrraga by historian Josep Xavier Muntané from the Institut del Món Juïc suggested that the location is approximately where the Jewish community's cemetery was located. The discovery in one of the graves of a ring with a Hebrew inscription confirmed that identification beyond reasonable doubt.

The cemetery also held the gruesome discovery of six mass graves, the first archaeological evidence ever

found of medieval anti-Jewish violence. Colet Marcé and Saula found the remains of 69 men, women, and children jumbled together. The killing was indiscriminate and carried out with extreme violence—37 bodies bore clear signs of trauma. A few of the victims were struck only once, with a single blow to the skull, but most were repeatedly assaulted; one adult male skeleton bore 22 distinct wounds. Analysis found the injuries were linked to specific weapons: sharp edges (swords, knives, and sickles), blunt objects (stones or planks), and solid objects (such as sticks or clubs). None of the injuries showed any sign of healing, indicating that death occurred during or soon after the attack. Coins and amulets found among the bodies (unusual in itself in Jewish cemeteries) all dated from the mid-fourteenth century, matching a historically recorded massacre of the town's Jews in 1348.

The historical and commemorative significance of this unique site of medieval Jewish persecution can hardly be overstated, but just as the excavation was coming to a conclusion, modern religion intervened. The unexpected arrival of representatives of orthodox groups, and eventually *Atra Kadisha*, forced the hand of the Catalan government. Fearing adverse international publicity if they resisted the religious protests,



Thinkin' Incan?

When you adventure on the frontier of the mind, body and spirit, it's a good idea to have a reliable guide. Introducing Adventure.Travel, the hub of physical, cultural and nature-based adventure travel and your guide to finding high quality, trusted tour operators from around the globe. Get there with confidence—start at www.adventure.travel

adventure.travel
inside the outside

Sponsored by ExOfficio and Gore-Tex®
Adventure.Travel is an initiative of the
Adventure Travel Trade Association

the government ordered an immediate halt to the excavation and handed over the bones from both the regular cemetery and the mass graves—many of which were unstudied—for immediate reburial at the site, in accordance with modern orthodox ritual.

Despite the setbacks and objections, surprising recent archaeological finds, such as an impressive artifact from the village of Saint-Paul-Trois-Châteaux in southeastern France, continue to highlight the continuity and evolution of Jewish cultural expressions. In a crumbling multistory building, identified with a “Tower of the Jews” mentioned in late medieval records, a local archaeological team headed by Mylène Lert of the Tricastine Archaeological Museum recovered a well-preserved limestone Gothic wall cupboard. Dated stylistically to the mid-fifteenth century, it still bears its original wooden doors. The top is decorated with the well-known conical “Jews’ hat” imposed by church authorities as a sign of derision and difference. But on the cupboard, it was used as a symbol of identity. The artifact also likely bears the earliest recorded use of a Star of David, the six-pointed star that had previously appeared as a decorative motif in Roman, Christian, and Muslim art, as a Jewish symbol. If any archaeological artifact can confidently be identified as an ancient Holy Ark—a place for the storage of the Holy Scriptures so central to Jewish worship—this is certainly one. But neither modern rabbis nor archaeologists can definitively tell us what rituals were performed before it; whether men and women were separated in its presence; what scrolls or other objects were contained within



A 15th-century Gothic Ark from southeastern France would have held the Holy Scriptures. It is decorated with traditional Jewish symbols such as the conical hat at the top and newer ones like the Star of David, previously used in non-Jewish cultures.

it; or even whether the direct descendants of its users in that small French village still identify themselves as Jews today. That uncertainty is instructive. The pursuit of answers to those and other questions can juxtapose the ancient and modern in illuminating ways. Medieval Jewish archaeology in Europe invites us to abandon our familiar stereotypes of “mainstream” and “minority” and to recognize how Jewish identity has evolved and changed over the centuries. It will also force us to acknowledge that cultural diversity, not ethnic homogeneity, lay at the heart of medieval European society. ■

*Neil Asher Silberman is a contributing editor to **ARCHAEOLOGY**.*