The Archaeology of Judaism

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The Archaeology of Medieval Europe

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and Box 11.4). The parish church and its furnishings thus formed a material archive of a particular locality, at a time before archives were routine in written form.

Although the Church was universal in its objectives, there were considerable variations in Christian material expression all over Europe, reflecting a variation in liturgy and performance, and probably in belief too (see above). While previous archaeologists and historians tended to scrutinise this variation to determine a common original core, the modern agenda stresses the value of the variants in understanding local beliefs and loyalties (Doig 2008, 14, 124). By the period we are concerned with, the liturgy was the product of centuries of accumulated references expressed metaphorically in colours, numbers, clothing, carving, architecture and performance. Its execution was thus necessarily learned and professional – and often confused. This ‘complexification’ of the liturgy (Doig 2008, 81), and its consequent materiality, provides both a challenge and an opportunity for archaeological research in the later Middle Ages.

PART 3: THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF JUDAISM by Samuel D. Gruber

The systematic and planned archaeology of Judaism in Europe is a relatively new phenomenon that has evolved from several trends that even today are not always easily reconciled. Judaism is a religion and those who practice it are Jews, sometimes referred to as the Jewish people, or even the Jewish Nation. Jews have been traditionally defined by their adherence to religious laws and practice, but also by ancestry. European Christians have defined Jews based on broader cultural affiliation, created as much by birth and association than belief. The archaeology of Judaism uses material culture to investigate the past of the Jewish religion and the broader lives and culture of those self-defined as Jews, and those so-defined by others.

The roots of “Jewish Archaeology” lie in the nineteenth and early twentieth century German scientific study of Judaism (Wissenschaft des Judentum), an academic movement that advocated intensive study of ancient, medieval and post-medieval source material and set out to create a more nuanced history of Jewish settlement and community. The movement mostly saw traditional Judaism as an historic relic, rather than as a dynamic religion, and was thus rejected by most practising Jews. The Wissenschaft movement was particularly attentive to texts, but was also recognised the possibility of the new field of archaeology providing new information.

A similar movement developed in England, led by the Jewish Historical Society of England (founded 1893), which identified Jewish settlement sites in England from before the expulsion of 1290, and details about the names, occupations and wealth of many Jewish individuals. This effort has continued for more than a century and recently led to archaeological excavations in York, Guildford and London. Nearly contemporary with the Jewish Historical Society was the publication by Israel Abrahams (1858-1925) of Jewish Life in the Middle Ages, a work about the everyday life of Jews as much as about religion. It gave extensive coverage to material culture (Abrahams, 1896).
Along with the development of Biblical Archaeology in the Near East, Jewish scholars supported excavations in Europe. Archaeological investigation into ancient Judaism was deliberately developed in the Holy Land, first by Europeans in the 19th nineteenth century. In the early twentieth century, Jews resident in Palestine supported this work, and continued after 1948 in the new state of Israel. The Israel Exploration Society (originally Society for the Reclamation of Antiquities) was founded in 1914. Among many discoveries – which continue today – are the remains of synagogues and Jewish villages of late antiquity. Parallel to this, were accidental discoveries in Europe of signs of ancient and medieval Judaism in the form of inscriptions and synagogues. One of the earliest was the uncovering of the Jewish cemetery of the rue de la Harpe in Paris in 1847 (Max Polonovski, pers.comm.). In the second half of the nineteenth century Jewish scholars joined the study of texts and material culture by studying Jewish funerary epitaphs, including those from the catacombs in Rome, but also cemeteries dating from the twelfth through sixteenth centuries in Worms, Prague, Vienna, Lvov and many other cities.

In Palestine there was a growing interest and professionalism in "Jewish archaeology," while in Europe there was growing evidence – but not widespread interest – in the potential of archaeology to expand historical horizons. Unfortunately, many finds explicitly linked to the European Jewish past have languished in storage and the potential link to Jews and Judaism of other finds have received little scrutiny. One of the few publicly accessible collections of medieval Judaica in Europe was that of the Musée de Cluny in Paris, assembled in the mid-nineteenth century by Joseph Isaac Strauss (1806-1888) who displayed 82 items at the Universal Exhibition in the Trocadero Palace in Paris and exhibited part of the collection at the Anglo-Jewish Historical Exhibition in London in 1887. This collection, which is mostly comprised of synagogue and household ritual objects was later purchased by Baron Nathaniel de Rothschild who presented it as a gift to the French nation (van Voolen, 1986/87).

The Archaeology of Judaism in Europe as we know it today developed directly out of the destruction of European cities in the Second World War. Post-war urban renewal developed opportunities for archaeological excavation in bombed out city centres. Documentation of standing Jewish structures – mostly synagogues – had begun in earnest in Germany and Poland during the interwar years, but most of these buildings were subsequently destroyed in the Holocaust, and many of the researchers killed. After 1945, however, remains of extensive medieval Jewish settlements in German cities could be fully exposed and investigated. These sites – previously known mostly through documentary evidence – gave a new physical dimension to the medieval presence in Europe. Unfortunately, limitations of archaeological technique as well as post-War political issues, financial constraints, and pressure for urban rebuilding, restricted the results of excavation and analysis. Otto Doppelfeld’s work at Cologne was the most extensive; where he revealed the remains of a medieval synagogue that he dated to the eleventh century (Doppelfeld a & b, 1959). An impressive multistory mikveh (ritual bath), a monument of early medieval engineering was also revealed (see Ch 11, p 479). New excavations carried out by the City of Cologne on the site since 2007 have confirmed much of Doppelfeld’s analysis, but has conclusively pushed the origin dates of
synagogue and mikveh back to the Carolingian period and possibly – at least for the synagogue – to late antiquity (Schütte, 2004) (Fig 10.8).

The aftershocks of the destruction of Jewish communities in the Holocaust continued to influence Jewish scholarship in Europe. Two generations of scholars were lost – precisely those great teachers and their promising students who were most interested in the medieval Jewish past. Those that survived moved to American and Israel, far from the physical remains of European Jewish culture. Jewish medieval studies became again concerned almost totally with texts and movable objects. The methodology of the Center for Jewish Art at the Hebrew University, for example, emphasized iconography over physical context.

Nowhere was there any planned effort to identify Jewish sites, nor to further exploit the opportunities afforded by unexpected finds. Throughout the Jewish world “Jewish archaeology” became almost synonymous with the uncovering of ancient Jewish remains, primarily in Israel, but also throughout the Mediterranean littoral, where a number of finds such as those from Ostia (Italy), Sardis (Turkey), Plovdiv (Bulgaria) and Stobi (Macedonia) attested to Judaism’s widespread acceptance in the ancient world (Rutgers 1998).

Recent excavations in Cologne have explored nearly a hectare of the Jewish quarter, revealing a synagogue, bath, hospital, bakery and houses from 13th–15th century and earlier. Among 150,000 objects recovered are about 500 fragments of limestone from the Gothic bimah of the synagogue, with inscriptions carved in the form of animals and plants. These were made by English and French masons from the workshops of Cologne cathedral (courtesy of Sven Schuette).
Medieval archaeology itself, as a serious discipline with its own rationale and methods continued to evolve, especially in Britain and in Germany and Italy (Ch 1). Many of the favoured archaeological conceptions such as urban archaeology and regional settlement surveys that should have brought more attention to the medieval Jewish component, however, tended to ignore it completely. A close reading of the archaeological literature from Europe between 1960 and 1990 would suggest that Jews were hardly present on the continent – despite their ubiquity in religious, historical, and legal sources as well as historical toponyms in many countries. Thus historians and archaeologists have different perceptions of the place and role of Jewish people in the European Middle Ages.

From the 1960s through the 1990s most identification of Jewish materials in Europe was almost entirely accidental (Gruber 2002). The most spectacular instance was the discovery of a massive Romanesque structure in Rouen, France, in 1976, that may have been a synagogue, but was more likely a yeshiva (Talmudic school) or possibly a scriptorium (Golb, 1998). In 2002, excavations in Lorca, Spain uncovered the entire plan of a fifteenth-century synagogue (see Ch 11, p 483) and surrounding houses.

The archaeology of Jewish sites has centred on religious and ritual sites. These were the most prominent structures of Jewish communities, especially synagogues and mikvāot (ritual baths), building types that are also most likely to incorporate distinguishing features allowing them to be identified as Jewish (see Ch 11, p 479). These structures have usually been found in the course of building renovation or construction, or as part of other excavations. Recently, as in Regensburg (Germany) and Vienna (Austria), planned excavations have been carried out at sites where medieval synagogues were known have existed before they were deliberately demolished, and the remains of those buildings and adjacent structures have been exposed (Codreanu, 2004; Mitchell, 2004). In Spain, a sensitized archaeological profession is now more adept at identifying Jewish sites discovered by accident, and historians and archaeologists are also seeking Jewish remains. A rich array of documentary sources, as in Jaén, Spain, can help locate former Jewish settlements in towns and cities throughout Iberia.

For centuries, traces of many Jewish cemeteries have been found, mostly sites which Jews were forced to abandon during periods of expulsion, or which were expropriated from them by authorities (see Ch 12, p 522). Commonly, inscribed stone gravestones (matzevot), often in only fragmentary condition, have been found; mostly discovered in locations of re-use, incorporated in later structures, roads, city walls, river embankments, etc. where they served as ready building material.

In a few cases, such as York (England), Prague (Czech Republic) and Lucera and Tarrega (Spain) previously forgotten and long unmarked Jewish cemeteries have been discovered in the course of urban development. In the past, such cemeteries might have been destroyed without careful examination. Now, such finds are usually reported to cultural heritage authorities and they are carefully excavated by trained archaeologists. In some cases, their Jewish character was perceived when excavations began, but archaeologists did not consult with present-day Jewish communities. In almost all cases when the burials were identified as Jewish – either before or after excavation – Jewish commu-
nities and other Jewish organizations have protested about the excavation and especially the exhumation of human remains as a violation of Jewish religious practice and law. In cases where the location of medieval Jewish cemeteries is known, Jewish communities have generally encouraged non-intrusive archaeological methods as a means of investigation. Jewish communities and archaeologists are still developing procedures to lessen conflict over cemeteries (see Ch 12, p 526).

Medieval treasures have been uncovered, mostly as accidental discoveries. The two most famous medieval treasure "hoards" are those of Colmar, discovered in 1863 and one from Erfurt found only in 1996. These hoards of money and precious objects were probably hidden in time of persecution and mass murder of Jews, and not recovered. The Colmar treasure contained an elaborate early fourteenth century wedding ring. Nothing is known of the individuals or groups who hid the treasures other than their apparent wealth, but it is assumed that they died in the massacres of 1348. Similar accidental discoveries of caches of documents and many artefacts of everyday life have been found in genizot, (plural of genizah), storage spaces in synagogues used for discarded texts and ritual items. But with the exception of the famous Genizah of the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Cairo (Goitein, 1999), whose documents have helped rewrite the Jewish and economic history of the Mediterranean region in the Early Middle Ages, these genizot have produced materials only from the eighteenth century on (Wiesemann, 1992). In the case of genizot, after a series of accidental discoveries in the 1980s and 1990s in former south German synagogue buildings, more systematic investigations have been undertaken. An assessment of the excavations and the medieval Jewish presence in Worms and Speyer has been published (Engels, 2004a & b; Heberer, 2004) in connection with a major exhibition at Speyer (Historisches Museum der Pfalz, 2004).