

CALL FOR PAPERS

Jews and the Worlds of the Ancient Mediterranean: Archaeology, Scholarship, and Networks of Collecting (c.1840–1940)

Conference organized by: Silvia Davoli (Strawberry Hill House & Garden / University of Oxford) Tom Stammers (Courtauld Institute)

Venue: Palazzo Butera, Palermo

Dates: 7-8 July 2026

Conference Description

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as traditional biblical narratives faced modern critique, Jews turned to archaeology to redefine their historical place and identity. Archaeological discoveries, from the Jewish catacombs of Rome to the synagogues of Galilee, from the Cairo Genizah to excavations across Egypt, Syria, and the Ottoman Empire, became tools for unearthing a complex, sometimes unexpected and multifaceted past that could challenge existing narratives about the ancient world, and also sustain new forms of belonging.

Jewish collectors, dealers, and scholars navigated a complex terrain: on one hand, the perceived tension between the "Hebraic" tradition, rooted in biblical text and an aniconic aesthetic, and the "Hellenistic" world of classical archaeology, with its celebration of the human body and visual form. Yet this classical tradition also embodied foundational values of European culture that Jews sought to claim as their own heritage. On the other hand, many Jewish scholars expanded the geographical boundaries of archaeology itself, turning eastward to embrace 'Oriental' archaeology and the study of the civilisations and historic cultures of the ancient Mediterranean, a move that affirmed the Jewish contribution to European scholarship, whilst also redrawing the boundaries of the academic field.

None of these developments can be separated from the histories of state-formation, imperial expansion and anticolonial resistance, nor from the development of new heritage legislation designed to control the excavation and export of antiquities. This conference seeks to connect material finds and developments in scholarship with overarching political, commercial and ideological pressures to explore the dialogue between modern Jews and the plural heritages of antiquity.

We welcome papers that explore these themes through geographical case studies and specific historical moments. In keeping with the location of Palermo, we are particularly keen to receive proposals which explore the place of Jews and Jewish culture within the crossroads of the Mediterranean and Western Asia in the period from 1840 to 1940.

Conference Themes

1. Jewish encounters with Classical Antiquity How did Jewish collectors and scholars engage with Greco-Roman art and archaeology? In what ways did debates over "Hellenism" and "Hebraism" among Jews and non-Jews shape collecting practices, the activity of translation and the reception of ancient texts and artefacts by museums?

What role did Jewish actors play in the formation of specialist societies and archaeological organisations in different European nation-states? How did they navigate the tension between integration into national cultural institutions, the menace of political antisemitism and pursuit of distinctly Jewish questions?

2. 'Jewish' Archaeology and the Politics of Identity How did archaeology serve as a tool for constructing modern Jewish identity? From biblical archaeology in Palestine to Egyptology and Near Eastern studies, how did Jewish scholars contribute to, adapt and sometimes challenge, the nationalist and colonial frameworks of 19th and early 20th-century archaeology? How did dramatic discoveries like the Cairo Genizah or the synagogues of Dura-Europos reshape understandings of Jewish art and history? And how did non-Jewish scholars interpret the evidence of ancient Jewish sites through the lens of contemporary political and cultural concerns?

3. The Ancient Mediterranean as a Cultural Crossroad: How did nineteenth and early twentieth-century Jewish scholars and intellectuals reimagine the Mediterranean and Western Asia as a unified cultural and commercial sphere, rather than a frontier dividing "East" and "West," "Roman" and "Barbarian", or "Christian" and "Muslim"? We welcome papers exploring how archaeological discoveries, the study of material culture, merchant networks, and cultural exchange challenged binary divisions and illuminated the interconnected histories of Jewish, Islamic, and Christian Mediterranean communities.

4. Mobility, Migration and the Transformation of the Disciplines In what ways did Jews both establish and unsettle the formation of scholarly disciplines related to the study of the ancient world? What was the relationship between Judaism, and Jewish history, and the sciences of philology and archaeology? How did the movement of Jewish scholars shape the exchange of ideas? And how did the forced exodus of Jewish scholars from Europe in the 1930s reshape the fields of archaeology, art history, and museum studies in Britain, America, and beyond? What continuities and ruptures marked their intellectual trajectories, and how far was new knowledge generated by the 'translocation' of antiquities?

5. Art Market Agents and the Commerce of Cultures What role was played by Jewish intermediaries in the circulation of antiquities across the Mediterranean? How did Jewish dealers mediate between local communities and the international clientele of collectors and archaeologists? What businesses were formed in the export and sale of

antiquities from ‘source countries’, and how did Jewish dealers establish their expertise and credibility in emerging areas of research? In what ways did such business intersect with larger infrastructures of trade and empire?

6. Sicily as Mediterranean Laboratory Sicily harboured one of the largest and most vibrant Jewish communities of the medieval Mediterranean, a civilization marked by extraordinary cultural syncretism and economic success. How has the Jewish past of Palermo and other Sicilian cities been remembered, forgotten, and rediscovered? What new significance did Sicily assume in the Jewish imagination with the late nineteenth century rediscovery of Sicilian Judaism?

Keynote Speakers

Steven Fine (Yeshiva University)

Hindy Najman (University of Oxford) and Paul Collins (British Museum)

Giuseppe Mandalà (Università degli Studi di Milano)

Suzanne Marchand (Louisiana State University)

Alain Schnapp (Université Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne)

Submission Guidelines

We invite proposals for 20-minute papers addressing any of the themes outlined above. Please submit:

- An abstract of 300 words
- A brief biographical note of 100 words

Deadline for submissions: **15 March 2026**

Notification of acceptance: 3 April 2026

Please send submissions to: briony.truscott@history.ox.ac.uk

Practical Information

The conference will be held at Palazzo Butera, an 18th-century aristocratic palace in Palermo's historic Kalsa district, overlooking the sea. Selected papers from the conference may be considered for publication in an edited volume or special journal issue.

Conference Support

This conference is supported by the John Fell Fund (University of Oxford), The Jewish Country Houses & their Worlds project (University of Oxford), Palazzo Butera and the Museo Ebraico di Roma.

We will contribute substantially to travel, accommodation, and subsistence costs, but expect participants to seek additional and alternative funding wherever possible. Travel bursaries may be available for early-career scholars and speakers traveling from outside Europe (details to be confirmed).