

What It Was Like to Be a Jew in Medieval Cologne, Etched Into a Slate in Hebrew

The writing helps reveal a vibrant world where Jews weren't outsiders, in a city that provided a secular alternative to other Jewish communities in Germany at the time.

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Jan 03, 2020 1:30 PM, Haaretz



The site in Cologne, Germany, where slates with medieval Hebrew writing were found.

A centuries-old Jewish artifact was recently discovered near a building that once housed a bakery in Cologne, Germany. It was fascinating despite its lack of sacredness. Etched on a slate in neat Hebrew are people's names, and alongside them letters that represent numbers. It's a list of debts to a grocery store, says Effie Shoham of Ben-Gurion University, an expert on Ashkenazi Jewish history.

"Yaakov Bona, whose name hints that either he or his family came from the nearby city of Bonn, is one of the people listed as owing a debt," Shoham says as he gazes at a scan of this rare [archaeological](#) find on his computer. There's also a hole in the slate "that indicates that maybe someone hung it on his belt and walked around town with the list of debts," Shoham adds with a smile, hypothesizing that the baker gave one of his workers the list and sent him out to collect the money.

The item was found in digs that have been going on for more than a decade in Cologne's city center in search of remnants of a Jewish community that flourished in the Middle Ages. About 400 such texts have been found, but only around half are legible and decipherable. Shoham's research partner, Prof. Elisabeth Hollender of Goethe University Frankfurt, is working to decipher the slates and publish the results.

The texts were written in the first half of the 14th century. "They're written in Hebrew letters – some are in Hebrew and some are in German written with Hebrew letters," Shoham says.

Scholars are divided on whether this language is essentially an early form of Yiddish. The writing was etched on the slates with a nail-like chisel.

“In the Middle Ages, these slates were used for daily needs rather than parchment or paper, which were very expensive,” Shoham says. “Their material was cheaper and more available, to use as drafts.”

Shoham likens these finds to the famous Cairo Geniza, Jewish manuscripts that were preserved for centuries; a geniza is a storage area in a synagogue or cemetery for used Hebrew-language books or religious writings destined for a proper burial. Top of Form

“Obviously we’re not talking about something quite that size, but the dig in Cologne has yielded several hundred texts and partial texts in Hebrew and in Hebrew letters that were never moved from the place where they were created in the city’s Jewish quarter,” Shoham says. “This is something unique, and it matches the sort of things we know from the Cairo Geniza.”

As with the Cairo Geniza artifacts, which contributed to the study of Jewish literature, the Talmud, religious law and daily life, the Cologne texts “are on a very everyday almost popular level,” Shoham says. “They illuminate the dynamics of daily life in the thriving Cologne Jewish community of the time.”



One of the slates with medieval Hebrew writing found in Cologne, Germany. Jewish Museum in Cologne

Not a people apart

In recent years, Shoham has been closely involved in the Cologne dig and in the building of a new museum at the site. One objective of his research, which is supported by the Israel Science Foundation, is to highlight “the very close ties between the Jews and their Christian environment,” he says. “I want to challenge the notion that the Jews are ‘a people that dwells apart’ in a closed ghetto,” he says.

The findings so far help to support this argument. For example, alongside a mikveh found in excavations done in the 1950s, the new dig has uncovered a bathhouse that was used by both Jews and non-Jews. Also, in the late 19th century, a kind of neighborhood register from medieval times was found; it shows that the Jewish quarter wasn’t inhabited exclusively by Jews.

“Jews rented houses to non-Jews, too,” Shoham says. “These findings could be fruitful material for a discussion on Jewish-German relations past, present and future.”

Other cities in [Germany](#) took pride in having a significant number of important rabbis, Torah scholars and famous yeshivas. The most famous examples are the ShUM cities on the Rhine: Speyer, Worms and Mainz.

Cologne, however, was based more on commerce. Until the 14th century, it was one of the largest cities in Germany, “a huge city in medieval terms, with a population of 50,000 at its peak, a mega-metropolis,” Shoham says. Its location near a strategic point on the Rhine made it a city that drew kings, emperors and traders.

The earliest documentation of a Jewish presence stems from the 11th century, but it probably dates back much longer. Some scholars believe that Jews lived in the city starting as far back as the Roman era. Shoham describes the Cologne community as “a kind of secular alternative” to other Jewish communities in Germany at the time, a place where the rabbinical influence was much less pronounced.

Another interesting text found in the dig is a fragment from a Yiddish-language novel; the artifact could be the oldest literary text in this language ever discovered. One excerpt, which is being researched by Prof. Erika Timm of the University of Trier, says: “The knight stepped forward and asked, please let me sleep by your side.”

This is believed to have been written in the 14th century before 1349, the year a mob attacked the Jewish quarter, torched the synagogue, killed and wounded Jews and plundered their property due to a libel alleging the Jews had spread the Black Plague that killed tens of millions of Europeans. The Jewish community was wiped out. Survivors were expelled from the city, and a Jewish presence was only revived there in 1372.

This newer version of the community more closely resembled the other Jewish communities in Germany, with a strong rabbinic presence. But in 1424 the Jews were expelled from the city once again, bringing the medieval Jewish community of Cologne to an end. Jewish life didn't resume there until after the French Revolution.



One of the slates with medieval Hebrew writing found in Cologne, Germany. Jewish Museum in Cologne

Reluctant outsiders

Shoham teaches in Ben-Gurion University's Jewish History Department. He wrote his doctorate at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem on outsiders in medieval [Ashkenazi Jewish](#) society, exploring the "societal attitude toward the insane, lepers and the disabled" – and producing the Hebrew-language book "Reluctant Outsiders." Shoham, who this summer will publish a book on Jewish involvement in crime in medieval Europe, is the only Israeli researching the current project on Jewish life in medieval Cologne.

The excavations in the city began shortly after World War II, when 85 percent of Cologne was destroyed. German archaeologist and historian Otto Doppelfeld, who was wounded in action at the start of the war, persuaded the British occupiers to let him excavate in the city.

Doppelfeld was mainly interested in Cologne's Roman past, but in the '50s he discovered that some of the sites told a different story – of the city's forgotten Jewish past.

Once he realized this, Doppelfeld began working with the local chief rabbi, Zvi Asaria (also known by his German name, Hermann Helfgott), who survived the war in German captivity as a soldier in the Yugoslav army. In the '50s he was sent from Israel to Cologne as part of the reparations delegation. Doppelfeld and Asaria uncovered the synagogue, the room where the Jewish archive is believed to have been kept (though nothing of it was preserved), and the beautiful mikveh.

In the early 2000s, the archaeologist Sven Schütte proposed expanding the project to include the construction of a museum about Jewish life in Cologne. In cellars in buildings in the city hundreds of years old, Schütte found fragments from the synagogue including parts of the bimah, as well as jewelry and the writing slates.

There is evidence of a Jewish community in Cologne already in the fourth century. But Schütte's claims that the artifacts prove a continuous Jewish presence in Cologne since Roman times stirred controversy among scholars, many of whom say Jews didn't settle there until centuries later.

Schütte "fought his critics as if they were his personal enemies, and there were a number of scandals, mainly because of the man's coarseness," Prof. Michael Toch, an expert on German Jewish history, told Haaretz in 2013. That year, Schütte was demoted after he told Haaretz that opposition to his excavations at the site was due to "latent anti-Semitism."

But the excavations have continued full force. The museum, to be called MiQua, will house the artifacts discovered by Doppelfeld, Schütte and others, the same ones being researched by Shoham. "The museum will take a different approach than what you usually find at a memorial site in Germany," Shoham says.

The museum won't just commemorate the tragedy of the Jewish community there, it will showcase its complex fabric of life, both religious and mundane – even when the archaeological evidence is of a medieval toilet.

In 2011, in a building in the Jewish quarter, outside the synagogue and next to the home of a prosperous family, [a Hebrew inscription was found](#): "This is the window through which the feces are to be taken out."

This shows that Hebrew was used for daily needs, and in a way, this message wasn't mundane at all. "Etching an inscription like this on stone presumes that whoever removes the feces from the cesspit could understand this writing," Shoham says.