

## 2017-2018 Jews and the Material in Antiquity

The past two decades have witnessed what many have now come to call the “material turn.” Attention to issues of materiality has moved beyond the confines of those disciplines that have long studied material culture (e.g., archaeology and art history) and to the very center of academic inquiry across the Humanities and Social Sciences. This reorientation reflects the growing willingness among scholars in a range of disciplines, such as history, anthropology, and religious studies, to work at the intersection of the literary and the material—and indeed to question the divide between them in the process. A widening range of scholars has thus begun to explore the profound interconnectedness among things, space and place, and embodiment, and to place these in dialogue with the signifying practices that are essential to the production of cultural forms.

As materiality has emerged as a governing category of analysis, older dichotomies between word and thing, language and action, and text and artifact have given way to more sophisticated understandings of the material nature of symbolic practices. Rather than beginning from the premise that “all the world is text” and thus something to be “read,” many scholars increasingly emphasize the sensuous and material dimensions of their objects of study. In this paradigm, the terms matter and materiality are not limited to objects or their constituent materials narrowly construed, but instead demand holistic consideration of landscapes and built environments, bodily practices and disciplines, sensory regimes and perceptual schemes, and narrative and representational practices. At the same time, these insights have prompted textual scholars to approach their texts—even when produced and transmitted through oral performance in face-to-face contexts of learning—as the products of concrete material processes, rather than as disembodied and abstract codes. These developments have thus not only generated exciting new theoretical models and methodological tools, but have also broadened the scope of materials that might be brought within the analytic of “the material.”

Drawing from the insights of the material turn, our proposed Theme Year frames its inquiry around the material dimensions of Jewish antiquity. Our understanding of the potential analytic purchase of materiality as it relates to Jews and antiquity is multifold. First and foremost is the question of how Jews related to matter and how this history has been reconstructed in modern scholarship. How did Jews experience things such as the human body, sacred objects, or even the Land of Israel? How did they sense them, understand them, and even construct them? Conversely, what relationships between Jews and matter did those who were not Jewish draw? The challenge of addressing these questions necessitates a comparative perspective in which the Jewish experience is firmly situated within its various historical contexts. Only then might we ask whether we can speak of a specifically *Jewish* materiality in antiquity, and if so, what are its contours and characteristics?

Systematic comparative inquiries of this kind are long overdue, in particular for the ancient period when Jewish society (in all of its diversity) formed from within the wider cultural landscape of the Mediterranean and Near East (ca. 300 BCE to 750 CE). The past decade has seen a profound shift as scholars have come to emphasize the porous, intersecting, and contested boundaries of ancient religious formations and the complex processes by which different religious designations were ultimately constituted. Many now regard the assumption that we can talk from the outset of “Judaism,” “Christianity,” and even “paganism” as distinct religions as teleological and anachronistic. Our call to an integrative approach to ancient Jewish studies and to a comparative and collaborative approach to antiquity more broadly, benefits from and develops these insights.

A number of individual scholars are already working on projects that fall within this general purview, researching topics such as: sacrificial discourse and Jewish liturgy after the destruction of the Second Temple; Jewish spatial and architectural practices; biblical “relics” as objects of contention between Jews and Christians; the history of Jewish sensory regimes; the complex relationships between text and image in ritual artifacts; and the performance of gender and the history of the Jewish body. But no single group of scholars has yet to take up this research program in a sustained or systematic fashion.

We are persuaded that a collective enterprise of this nature will not only yield a raft of innovative articles and books, but also has the potential to reorient the field of ancient Judaism, which continues to privilege the history of ideas and the study of literary or hermeneutic processes. By contrast, an analytical framework built around the category of materiality would spur scholars to integrate more satisfactorily the textual traces and material sources from Jewish antiquity, working across boundaries that divide scholars into a dizzying array of academic sub-specializations (e.g., midrashic and talmudic literature, liturgy and piyyut, archaeology and art history, social history, and history of religions). In addition, the theme of materiality offers Jewish studies scholars new ways to position Jewish literatures, practices, and social formations within the shifting historical contexts of the ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern worlds. We thus envision a forum in which the study of materiality provides a framework this is both capacious enough and sufficiently unifying to bring together a diversity of topics, subfields, and genres not only within ancient Judaism, but also in ancient cultures more broadly.

Scholars of ancient Judaism face particularly daunting and interesting challenges when seeking to integrate textual and material evidence. The material evidence of Jewish culture, on the one hand, and Jewish literary expression, on the other, often barely overlap or, worse, seem to reflect distinct and even contradictory versions of Jewish historical experience in antiquity. In large measure, this odd effect is a result of the degree to which the evidence for ancient Judaism is dominated by the vast rabbinic corpus, which (because of its peculiar production and transmission) is only attested in much later written documents from the medieval period and after. At the same time, as

a generation of scholars has made clear, the Judaism of the rabbis differs in important ways from other forms of Judaism that existed in antiquity, the evidence for which is almost exclusively archaeology. Yet the results of recent and ongoing archaeological exploration have not yet been fully incorporated into the historiography on ancient Jewish society and culture. The study of ancient Judaism is thus bedeviled by a divide between a rabbinic textual tradition without contemporaneous textual evidence and a material culture lacking a rich discursive context. This project will, therefore, involve an ongoing exploration of the complex and often seemingly contradictory relationship between literary evidence and its material counterparts. It is, therefore, an apt moment to bring together specialists committed to working across these evidentiary and disciplinary divides around the theme of *Jewish* materiality.

But it is not only scholars of ancient Judaism who need to be part of this conversation, particularly as it relates to questions about *Jewish* materiality. The theme of materiality is particularly useful for reconsideration of the traditional field boundaries and divisions of scholarly labor that characterize the study of antiquity more generally. This is the case for at least three reasons.

First, Jewish communities and lives were inextricably intertwined with other social and religious formations in the urban landscapes and built environments of the ancient world. Thus, to take one particularly rich example, the so called “magic bowls” found buried in the homes of Jews, Christians, Mandaean, and others living in the city of Nippur in Sasanian Mesopotamia (many of which are housed at the Kelsey Museum here at UM) offer poignant evidence of a multi-religious society whose members all turned to a shared ritual technology to protect themselves and their families from demons and the calamities they cause. These plain earthenware vessels inscribed with Aramaic incantations and often illustrated with a bound demon in their center represent the only physical artifacts from the milieu of the Babylonian Talmud and cast exciting new light on the Jewish culture of that region. The bowls are characterized by patterns of similarity and difference that demand collaborative work at the intersections of various fields.

Second (and flowing directly from the first), the production, spread, and use of material culture transcends social, religious, and ethnic divisions; thus, for example, archaeologists have demonstrated that the same workshops in the city of Rome produced artifacts for Jews and non-Jews alike, using identical techniques and technologies. Other scholars have even gone so far as to question the methods by which we designate certain objects as “Jewish,” “Christian,” “Roman” and so on.

Third, Jews not only participated in common forms of material practices like non-Jews, but also shared conceptions of materiality and matter; thus, for example, late antique rabbis appropriated elements of Galenic medicine and optics when developing their own embryology. The investigation of specifically *Jewish* materialities thus entails tracing the histories of things, as well as ideas about things, through the spaces of cities

and empires and across economic and social networks, in the process disrupting traditional scholarly divisions. We embrace such disturbance as a stimulus to new ways of studying of the deeper past.

As such, our vision for this Theme Year is for an intellectual space that will facilitate, generate, and model genuine cross-field and comparative conversation and collaboration. Ancient Jewish studies is particularly well positioned to initiate and ground such cross-field and interdisciplinary inquiry because of the dialectics of similarity and difference that characterized the relationship between Jews and the societies in which they were embedded. Focusing on materiality in the time range proposed will serve to frame and build a common conversation among participants. We imagine the participation of scholars whose work is not strictly within the confines of Jewish studies. Indeed, we hope to attract a group of scholars whose expertise spans across Jewish studies, religious studies, rabbinic literature, archaeology, art history, history, law, philosophy, mysticism and magic, and beyond. We propose that participants all work broadly in the same period and region, namely, the Mediterranean basin or western Asia from the Hellenistic to the early Islamic eras. We would especially welcome applications from scholars whose expertise straddles various political, social, cultural, linguistic, or religious formations (e.g., early Judaism and early Christianity, the Roman and Sasanian empires, or Greek, Coptic, Syriac, and Hebrew literary cultures). Moreover, we would encourage joint applications from pairs or teams of scholars working on collaborative projects (e.g., a Roman historian and a scholar of ancient Judaism working on the transformation of sacrifice and ritual in late antiquity).

With its impressive track-record of interdisciplinary and multi-lingual work and its mandate of global leadership in Jewish Studies, the Frankel Institute for Judaic Studies at the University of Michigan is uniquely situated to host *Jews and the Material in Antiquity*. We are convinced that the theme of Jewish materiality in antiquity will further enrich the robust scholarly conversations that are already taking place at the intersections between the Frankel Center for Judaic Studies and various departments and programs at the university. Of particular relevance are the Departments of Classical Studies, History, Anthropology, Near Eastern Studies, and History of Art as well as the new Interdisciplinary Program for Mediterranean Studies, the Interdepartmental Program in Art and Archaeology, and Museum Studies.

Moreover, the broader setting of the University of Michigan offers an array of exciting opportunities for collaboration and learning. Beyond enlisting UM faculty as potential fellows (see below), we also aim to create fora for the fellowship group to engage the expertise of UM Roman historians, ancient philosophers, art historians, archaeologists and anthropologists. For example, we envisage hands-on workshops at the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, which has many important artifacts from the ancient Mediterranean and Near East, including amulets, magic bowls, fragments of the *Templum Gentis Flaviae* (with remnants of the figures of Jewish captives), artifacts from Sepphoris, and coins. We are similarly eager to stage cross-disciplinary conversations

between scholars of antiquity and of other fields, such as a workshop engaging anthropologists of religion and materiality (e.g., Webb Keane and Paul Johnson) or of Mediterranean environmental history (e.g., Paolo Squatriti).