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# KOSHER DISHES

NEW ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES  
FROM MEDIEVAL ENGLAND REVEAL  
THAT LOCAL JEWS KEPT KOSHER  
DESPITE HARDSHIP

BY LAWRENCE H. SCHIFFMAN

**W**hen people hear the word “archaeology” most will immediately think of Israel or the ancient Near East. Who would have thought that important archaeological research pertaining to the history of the Jewish people would be going on in Oxford, England? But actually, a group of British archaeologists working in Oxford have published a fantastic study in which they examined two sets of evidence—animal bones and broken pottery. The simple result? They were able to confirm that an area known from medieval property records was indeed the Jewish quarter and that Jews in the 12th and 13th centuries observed the laws of *kashrus*.



Now, that last statement is probably not a surprise. But the details that were uncovered along the way about the medieval Jewish community of Oxford, their eating habits, and their religious observance are fascinating.

In the very same years that Oxford's famed university was coming into existence, only steps away there was a Jewish community that occupied a “Jewry,” a Jewish quarter located right near the central crossroads of the city. This community developed in the 12th and 13th centuries as Jews from France followed William the



Conqueror's invitation to create a network for credit and trade. (William was the first of the Norman French rulers of England and reigned from 1066 to 1087.) The community was certainly established by 1141, when King Stephen burned down one Jewish house and threatened to burn down the rest if the Jews did not provide financial support for a war he was engaged in.

In the 13th century, a survey of properties was undertaken that was so detailed that the exact locations of the homes of the Jews and the synagogue could be eas-

ily determined. Throughout this period, properties were regularly confiscated by rulers in order to fund their activities. Beginning in about 1270, various anti-Jewish provisions were put into effect, leading to the decline of the Jewish community. The last years leading to the expulsion, ironically, were those in which the *Tosafos Chachmei Angliyah* were compiled and Rav Yaakov ben Yehudah of London composed his halachic code, *Eitz Chayim*.

The Oxford Jewish community, along with the entire Jewish community of England, came to an end in 1290, when

the Jews were expelled and their property confiscated by the Crown. Jews were not readmitted to England until the 1650s. It is important to note, therefore, that the archaeologists distinguished a pre-Jewish layer in the deposit they analyzed that demonstrated very different eating habits from those of the Jews who came later. Further, after these properties were no longer in Jewish hands, higher strata in the excavation again demonstrated the very different diet of the later non-Jewish inhabitants.

In the course of some wider archaeologi-



**a-** Jar in Medieval Oxford ware, probably used as a cooking pot and dated to the late 11th or 12th century.  
**b-** Near-complete miniature jar in Early Brill coarseware from structure 3.1.

cal projects, some of the Jewish houses have been excavated, and enough non-Jewish buildings have been excavated to provide a basis for comparison. Specifically, one Jewish home was known as Jacob's Hall, owned by Jacob the son of Master Moses, and the other property was owned by Elekin son of Bassina. In Jacob's Hall there was a structure that was probably a latrine, into which much domestic garbage had apparently been dumped. On these two properties the archaeologists found a rich assemblage of 12th- or early-13th-century pottery, as well as large numbers of animal bones, obviously left over from eating. These were nice homes that had stone walls, tile floors and tiled roofs with chimneys.

The opportunity to study the lipids absorbed in the dishes (many of which were broken), as well as the discarded bones of a medieval Jewish house, provided a unique opportunity for archaeologists to investigate both the kosher observance and the eating habits of the Jewish occupants. Lipids are essentially fats and fatty acids that remain absorbed in pottery

(*beliyos* in the language of the *Shulchan Aruch*), which can be detected by chemical analysis. In fact, this is the first time that organic residue in dishes has been analyzed to confirm Jewish dietary practice. What was special about this research was the ability to examine both what had been absorbed into the dishes and the residue of bones. In this research, I saw confirmed the words of our Sages, who taught that pottery vessels, even those of fine quality, did indeed absorb elements of the foods they held.

If all the research revealed was that Jews kept *kashrus*, it would not be significant, but much more was learned. Let's start with the bone collection. During the period in which Jews lived in these houses, no pig bones were found. The dominant meat was apparently domestic fowl, mostly geese. Fish bones were common, mainly from herring. (I guess some things never change.) In contrast, the earlier and later non-Jewish phases of this site showed that the residents ate pork and a variety of non-kosher fish.

The vessels were carefully analyzed to

determine their lipid content. Needless to say, the diet of those who lived in these homes before the Jews and after, as well as those at the other non-Jewish sites in Oxford, demonstrate not only ruminants but also the presence of non-ruminants. A ruminant is an animal that initially ingests food into the rumen (*keres* in Hebrew), the first of its four stomachs, where it is formed into a mass known as the "cud," to be regurgitated and then chewed again and ingested. This is the process the Torah terms *ma'aleh geirah* (*Vayikra* 11:3-7, *Devarim* 14:6-8), referring to animals that chew their cud. Mammals that are not ruminants and do not have a system of four stomachs are not kosher. In the stratum uncovered for the period of Jewish occupation, only kosher ruminants were found.

Interestingly, the absence of lipids deriving from fowl in cooking vessels indicates the probability that they were cooked by another method, such as roasting on a spit. Dairy products were virtually absent from any of the pottery of the Oxford Jews. Apparently, cooked dairy foods were

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not eaten, and it may be that dairy food was not common there altogether. Interestingly, one vessel was found in which dairy had been cooked during the Jewish residence period. It is assumed that the fish eaten in Oxford came pickled for preservation from areas closer to the seacoast.

This is the first time this kind of chemical analysis has been done on cooking utensils owned by medieval Jews. However, analysis of bones has taken place at a few other sites. Two medieval sites from the 14th century in Catalonia in northeastern Spain yielded collections of animal bones from what is known to be the Jewish quarter. Most of the animals were sheep and goats, with a large number of birds at one site and cattle at the other.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the Spanish material is that, whereas numerous hindquarters were apparently sold to the nonkosher market in order to avoid the need to remove the *gid hanasheh* (sciatic nerve), some were actually *treibered* (removed) and used in the Jewish community.

Another study in Buda—the western

side of Budapest, west of the Danube—uncovered 14th-century Jewish remains in a 40-foot-deep pit. Here, Jewish occupancy was proven for the earlier period from the discovery of a Hebrew inscription. The Jewish stratum demonstrated avoidance of pork, but a small number of hind-leg bones were found, indicating that here as well the general practice was to try to sell the hindquarters on the non-Jewish market, but sometimes the meat was properly processed and eaten by members of the Jewish community. Unfortunately, the manner in which the bone specimens were recorded at the Oxford excavation made it impossible to know whether hind-leg bones were among them.

The chemical analysis done on the Oxford pottery represents a major step that is part of an overall scientific and technological advancement in the field of archaeology. The Oxford Jewish community was not large, some 35 households, but they clearly managed to maintain their traditions in difficult circumstances, living as they did in an emerging university town replete with large numbers of churches and convents, some of which were in their neighborhood.

While we can joke about their love for fowl and herring, archaeology has shown us that this community—made up of people who relocated from France and who would soon be expelled back to France, from which they would have to flee again—did not waver from their commitment to the Torah's laws regarding what the Rambam termed *ma'achalos asuros*, forbidden foods. ●

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