(Trans)religious diversity 2000 years ago

Report on an excursion to Rome and Ostia (10-17 March 2025)

How did different religions live together in ancient Rome? Students from Heidelberg University and the Heidelberg University of Jewish Studies explored this question on an excursion to Rome and Ostia in March 2025. The excursion was the culmination of a course that emerged from the teaching and research cooperation between the Department of Ancient History and Epigraphy at Heidelberg University and the Ignatz Bubis Chair for the History, Religion and Culture of the Europaean Jewry at the Heidelberg University of Jewish Studies. Before the fild trip began, the participants took part in the exercise '(Trans-)Religious Diversity? - Forms of Jewish and Roman coexistence in antiquity using the example of Rome and Ostia' under the direction of Christopher Decker, M.A., and Dr. Andreas Hensen. So the participants had prepared intensively for the subsequent excursion. On this basis, traces of the complex coexistence of different religions, but above all Judaism and the pagan Roman cults, were to be traced using historical sources on site. The ambitious aim of the course was to provide the participating students with a basic knowledge of the religion and culture of ancient Judaism as well as Roman cults such as the the imperial cult and the cult of Mithras and Isis. This knowledge was to be tested and expanded during the course of the excursion, which was also led in part by Dr. Nicolai Futás and Dr. Jonas Osnabrügge from the Department of Ancient History and Epigraphy at Heidelberg University, using the traces that still exist on site in Rome and the port city of Ostia.

The excursion participants with the leaders Christopher Decker, M.A., and Dr. Andreas Hensen, Dr. Nicolai Futás and Dr. Jonas Osnabrügge in front of the Trajan's Forum in Rome

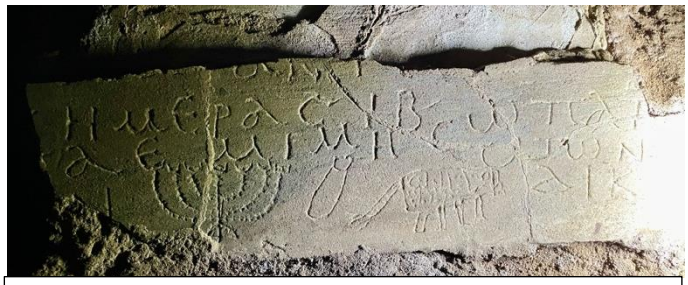
Photo: private

To this end, the students visited key places of remembrance of Jewish life, such as the Great Synagogue of Rome, which was built in 1904 on the former site of the Jewish ghetto, and the Jewish catacombs Vigna Randanini, one of the highlights of the excursion. On site, the group was guided by Dr. Elsa Laurenzi through the narrow and dark corridors at a depth of up to 16 metres. She has explored the catacombs intensively herself and was able to tell the excursion participants many fascinating facts about the history of their use and also their exploration. Approximately 1,200 graves, which date between the second and fifth centuries CE, are often identified as Jewish graves by surviving inscriptions, sometimes in Hebrew characters, sometimes by drawings of objects such as the menorah and the palm branch (lulav), which symbolises the Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot). A special Jewish grave shape is also rarely found: Kokh, a burial chamber carved into the stone, where the deceased lies with their head facing the aisle. These features have led to the identification of the catacombs as a place of Jewish culture. However, the majority of the tombs are classic ancient loculi, i.e. tombs carved into the stone and laid out parallel to the corridor, and not all of the Latin and ancient Greek inscriptions show clear characteristics of the Jewish religion. Nor can a Jewish background always be recognised from the particularly beautiful paintings. To see these paintings, you have to venture into the centre of the catacombs, which have not yet been completely excavated. Depictions of various plants and flowers, animals and Roman-looking figures, which could be interpreted as Nike, Fortuna or Tyche, mingle with several red dipinti (inscriptions drawn on the plaster or stone) of the menorah. A clear identification of the burial chambers as “Jewish” or “Roman” is therefore not possible in every individual case, Rather, many of the findings point to a mixture of both sepulchral cultures (burial cultures). This is particularly evident in the aforementioned burial chamber with Fortuna/Tyche and Victoria/Nike and a depiction of Pegasus: Loculi and Kokhim tombs are located here in a very confined space.

A clear identification of the burial chambers as “Jewish” or “Roman” is therefore not possible in every individual case; rather, many of the findings point to a mixture of both sepulchral cultures (burial cultures). This is particularly evident in the aforementioned burial chamber with Fortuna/Tyche and Victoria/Nike and a depiction of Pegasus: Loculi and Kokhim tombs are located here in a very small space.

Tomb inscription with menorah and palm branch (lulav) and a shofar (a musical instrument made of animal horn, which commemorates the planned sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham)

Photo: Dr. Andreas Hensen



Grave inscription with menorah, Passover lamb (this heralds Passover, it is traditionally eaten at the seder meal) and an oil bottle (in memory of Hanukkah)

Photo: Dr. Andreas Hensen

Dipinto of a *menorah*

Photo: Dr Andreas Hensen

Ceiling painting in a family tomb with various plants and animals, in the centre a medallion with a female figure with a cornucopia: possibly Fortuna

Phot: Dr Andreas Hensen

Evidence of such cultural mixing was also found at other stops on the excursion, for example in the Callixtus Catacombs. Even if pictorial representations predominate here, which are primarily read as Christian, such as the story of Jonah in the whale, the majority of the graves cannot be clearly identified as “Christian” or “Roman”. The tomb types are also more likely to be interpreted as typical of catacombs. Contrary to popular belief, not all pagan Romans were cremated. This was also demonstrated by the visit to the tomb of the Scipiones from the 3rd century BCE, through which Dr. Francesco Pacetti, head of the Sovraintendenza ai Beni Culturali of the city of Rome, guided the group. The Scipiones, an influential

Roman family, often kept elaborately designed sarcophagi of their ancestors here, which particularly emphasised their deeds and thus served above all to showcase the living relatives.

This is where the diverse Roman sepulchral culture met the self-portrayal of ancient aristocratic families that was omnipresent in Rome.

The Arch of Titus on the Forum Romanum

Foto: Hannes Freitag

The combination of religious and political elements was also evident in the Roman Forum, the centre not only of Rome's political but also religious history. The fact that these two spheres cannot be viewed separately from each other was made clear by the spatial unity and functional overlap of the Curia Iulia, an important meeting place of the Roman Senate, and the temples and sacred areas of the Forum, as well as their functional overlaps. For example, it was essential for important political decisions in Rome that the gods expressed their favour, which was always accompanied by ritual practices. Many temples on the Forum are also dedicated to deified emperors and thus served to legitimise and showcase various rulers. The Arch of Titus, which for many is a symbol of Jewish history in antiquity, also stands on the forum. It was erected at the end of the first century CE for the victory of the then already deified Emperor Titus over rebels in Judea and the conquest of Jerusalem.

Mosaic in a merchant's shop, Piazza delle Corporazioni, in Ostia

Photo: Hannes Freitag

As the excursion progressed, it became increasingly clear to the participants that it was not only the cosmopolitan city of Rome that acted as a melting pot between religions, but also its harbour city of Ostia. Dr. Franco Tella, an experienced archaeologist who researches and teaches in Ostia, guided the group through the city, which has been spectacularly preserved from an archaeological perspective. The focus here was particularly on Ostia's history as a trading city and the resulting fusion of different cultural influences. The density of still visible traces of trade with various areas of the Roman Empire, such as Mauritania and Egypt, was particularly impressive.

The importance of Ostia as a transit city to Rome was also very well illustrated by the preserved building remains. A high density of restaurants and snack bars, some of which are exceptionally well preserved, but above all a huge ancient bakery, also illustrated the importance of the grain trade and processing, as Dr. Franco Tella explained. Finally, the presentation of the city came to an end in the Serapeum of Ostia. Like the cult of Isis, the cult of Serapis was imported to Rome from Egypt and gained a large following here. Both are examples of so-called mystery cults, which were typical of the pluralistic ancient religious landscape in the Roman Empire and are a further indication of the cultural diversity and tolerance towards other gods and their cults. However, contrary to what one might expect from the name “mystery cult”, the cult of Isis was an extremely public cult and there were often parades through the city, with a statue of the goddess being carried along.

Only very specialised parts of cult life were reserved for a few initiated participants. The cult and the world of gods associated with it were therefore widely known to all inhabitants of Ostia. Another typical feature of the mystery cults is that, unlike the "classical" Roman pagan religion, they promised initiates a life after death. One example of the mystery cults that has also left its mark in Heidelberg is the cult of Mithras, which gradually spread throughout the Roman Empire from the 1st century CE. Although a Persian-Iranian origin was already attributed to it in antiquity, the cult is thought to have originated in Rome and Ostia: with around 18 Mithras shrines, Ostia has a uniquely high density and also the oldest evidence of Mithras worship. The excursion participants were able to visit the Mitreo delle Terme del Mitra, which, built into the underground rooms of a thermal bath, is still almost completely intact and was particularly impressive due to its lighting effects.

Mitreo delle Terme del Mitra, Ostia

Photo: Bastian Bleile

On the second day in Ostia, the focus was once again particularly on the Jewish traces in the harbour city. This time, the group was led by Prof. Carlo Pavolini, who has published numerous archaeological research works on Ostia, including a comprehensive and fundamental handbook on the city's history. Under his guidance, the group visited Ostia's synagogue, which is located just outside the city centre and is one of the oldest surviving examples (dating from the middle/end of the 2nd century CE) of a Jewish house of prayer in Europe. The fact that the synagogue was a secondary use of a Roman residential building was easily recognisable, for example, from the kitchen appliances that were added later and the basic structure of a relatively simple insula (a Roman tenement house). The building could be identified as a synagogue by the surviving Torah shrine (Aron ha-Kodesh): The columns of the aedicula (decorated wall structure with columns or pillars framing a niche), which decorated the shrine, show reliefs with a menorah.

Menorah decoration in the synagogue of Ostia

Photo: Lea Tappenbeck

However, the fact that the synagogue is located just outside the city of Ostia does not mean that the Jewish religion in Ostia was only practised outside the city. This could be proven by a new find that the group visited under the guidance of Prof. Pavolini. In fact, just a few weeks before the start of the excursion, a group of archaeologists excavated a building structure in the centre of Ostia which, according to press reports, could be the oldest mikveh (an immersion bath for ritual purification) in Europe: A small pool of water was found, accessible by steps that protrude into the pool. The identification as a mikveh was also confirmed by the discovery of a lamp with a menorah on top. However, as the immediate surroundings of the complex have not yet been excavated, it remains to be seen whether further evidence will be found to confirm this interpretation. For the participants of the excursion, it was very exciting to be able to follow such an investigation on site and see the finds for themselves. If this is indeed another

example of the close links between different religions in Rome and Ostia, it would certainly no longer come as a surprise to the excursion participants after this trip.

Current excavation with water basin (under the cover), possibly to be identified as Mikveh, Ostia

Photo: Hannes Freitag

The week-long excursion to Rome and Ostia was an impressive experience for all participants and an exciting highlight of their engagement with the topic of (trans)religious diversity, which is at least as topical and relevant today as it was around 2000 years ago.

Lea Tappenbeck