

HANNAH'S SEAL

GOLD COIN FROM THE TEMPLE

BODLEIAN BOWL

OXFORD

A VIVID SHOWCASE OF JEWISH LIFE

From hidden gold coins to the modernist paintings of David Bomberg, Oxford's Ashmolean Museum has a rich collection of Jewish artefacts. **Rebecca Abrams** highlights the exhibits that trace a remarkable 4,000 year-old history



FERTILITY FIGURINE

FERTILITY FIGURINE

SAUSAGE SELLER PLAQUE

FERTILITY FIGURINE

TANG DYNASTY CAMEL

Founded in 1683 by Elias Ashmole and reputed to be the world's first modern museum, the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford contains amongst its treasures a remarkable collection of Jewish artefacts, ranging in origin from Ancient Canaan to modern-day Europe. How these objects came to be in the Ashmolean also reflects Oxford's long and multifaceted relationship with Jews and Judaism.

One of the museum's earliest Jewish acquisitions was the Bodleian Bowl, a 13th-century bronze cauldron discovered in a disused moat in Norfolk in around 1696, four centuries after the mass expulsion of the Jews from England. The bowl changed hands several times before being bought in 1742 for £1.5s.0d by the clergyman Dr Richard Rawlinson, a graduate and benefactor of St John's College, Oxford. On his death in 1755, he bequeathed over 5,000 manuscripts to the Bodleian Library, as well as his 'metal Jewish vessel'.

This was a period of scholarly interest in Hebraism, and Rawlinson's interest in the bowl was doubtless piqued by its cryptic Hebrew inscription. The inscription's meaning and the bowl's provenance were not fully understood until the 19th century, when property deeds came to light that revealed it had originally been given by Rabbi Joseph of Colchester to his community in around 1260, probably in return for charitable donations to fund his journey to the Holy Land with his father, Rabbi Bechtel, head of the Paris yeshiva. Fleur de Lys decorations on the bowl are a reminder that the medieval Jewish community in England originally came from Rouen in Normandy. Why the bowl ended up in a moat in Norfolk remains a mystery but one possibility is that it was dumped or hidden there in 1290, when the Jews fled the country on pain of death.

The museum's Jewish holdings stretch back to the dawn of Jewish existence, thanks to the archaeological boom of the 20th century, in which Oxford University played a major role. The Ancient Near East gallery includes a number of objects from Bronze Age tombs in Jericho, excavated by the formidable Kathleen Kenyon, the first female President of the Oxford University Archaeological Society, and Principal of St Hugh's College, Oxford from 1962 to 1973. Also displayed are female fertility figurines discovered during Kenyon's excavations in Jerusalem in the 1960s. They come from the Ophel Hill caves, thought to be the site of the ancient Judaeian capital, and indicate that idol worship was widespread in the eighth century BCE.

The British presence in Mandate Palestine before 1948 also led to more chance discoveries, such as a small jasper seal, which was found near Tell Ed-Duweir (in southern Israel), at the site of the ancient city of Lachish. Made of red jasper and engraved with a winged sphinx and an ankh (the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic

for life), the seal was bought by a chaplain to the British Army, Rev AH Gibson, while he was visiting the site in 1946. In the 1970s, Oxford archaeologist Dr John R Bartlett dated it to the mid- to late 8th century BCE, around the time of the Assyrian invasion of Judaea. The inscription in palaeo-Hebrew reads: 'l-h-n-h' (belonging to Hannah), one of the earliest references to the name Hannah outside the Hebrew Bible. Seals belonging to women are rare from this period but suggest that women in ancient Judaea were able to make financial transactions in their own right.

More serendipitous still was the discovery in 1850 of a single gold coin, dug up by an Oxfordshire farmer while ploughing his fields. The coin bears the head of Emperor Vespasian and was minted in Judaea by the Romans in 70 CE, soon after their conquest of Jerusalem. Professor Chris Howgego, Keeper of the Heberden Coin Room at the Ashmolean, has pieced together the coin's extraordinary journey to England, which probably took place immediately after the destruction of Jerusalem, when Rome embarked on a new attempt to conquer England. Roman troops were transferred from Judaea to England, so this coin may have belonged to a soldier who'd battled the Jewish rebels in the Great Revolt. Soon after arriving in England, he lost – or hid – the coin near what is now the village of Wilcote, Oxfordshire, where it lay buried for the next 2,000 years.

The most extraordinary part of the coin's story relates to the gold from which it was made. With no other sources of gold available in Judaea in 70 CE, Dr Howgego has proposed that it was made from melted-down gold looted from the Second Temple when Jerusalem was razed. The coin epitomises how objects, despite their material solidity, hold fluid and complex meaning. Is this a Roman or a Jewish object? A symbol of defeat or resilience?

The circular funeral plaque on display in the museum's Mediterranean Gallery is beyond doubt both Roman and Jewish. Its inscription tells us it was made to memorialise a sausage seller named Alexander, who worked at one of Rome's markets and died at the age of 30, 'a good soul, friend of all'. The menorah at the end of the inscription makes clear that Alexander was Jewish and may have been the purveyor of kosher meat to the community. The plaque is in Latin, but the combination of Greek and Jewish phrases and Jewish iconography reflects the close interaction between Jews and non-Jews at this time. But for Jewish Romans, who lived and worked in sight of the Arch of Titus, which depicted triumphant Roman soldiers carrying off booty from the ransacked Temple, the use of the menorah on their tombs was also an act of defiance,

a proud assertion of Jewish survival.

Jewish emancipation in the 19th century enabled the emergence of many important Jewish visual artists, a number of whom are represented in the museum's art collection, including William Rothenstein, Jacob Epstein, Mark Gertler, David Bomberg and Lucian Freud. The museum is also home to one of the world's largest archives of work and correspondence by the Pissarro family. One gallery is devoted to paintings by Camille Pissarro and his son Lucian, who made his home in London. Camille was the tenth generation of Portuguese conversos who had settled in Bordeaux in the 18th century. His determined eschewal of his Jewish identity was shaken by the Dreyfus Affair, which not only bitterly divided France's artistic community but also forced Pissarro to confront the impact of

being Jewish on his own artistic fortunes.

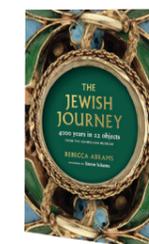
An Oxford family donated one recently acquired object: a 10th-century pottery camel from Tang Dynasty China. Its

Jewish significance was

discovered by chance in 2014, when a box of documents came to light belonging to the German archaeologist Paul Jacobsthal. Forced to flee Germany in 1935, when he was barred from his post as professor of classical archaeology at the University of Marburg, Jacobsthal was one of many leading scholars who sought refuge in Oxford. He was offered a position at Christ Church and remarkably (given the paper shortage) in 1944 Oxford University Press published his great work *Early Celtic Art*, which served as a robust rebuttal of Nazi theories of Aryan supremacy.

Jacobsthal was obliged to leave behind nearly all of his research material, amassed over his lifetime, but he brought his Chinese camel with him to Oxford, where for the next 30 years it sat proudly in the front window of his home on the Banbury Road. In carefully worded letters to and from his colleagues back in Nazi Germany, the camel became a code word for Jews. For Jacobsthal, his camel became a symbol not only for how cultural context changes an object's meaning, but for his own determination to survive persecution.

Like the Jews themselves, these extraordinary objects have migrated great distances. Individually and collectively, they tell stories of cross-cultural interaction, survival and endurance. ■



The Jewish Journey: 4,000 years in 22 objects by Rebecca Abrams (Ashmolean Museum). For a tour of the Ashmolean's Jewish objects email: rebecca.abrams@gmail.com. Rebecca Abrams is Royal Literary Fund Fellow at Brasenose College, Oxford.

COURTESY OF ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM