



SOPRINTENDENZA
ARCHEOLOGIA
BELLE ARTI E PAESAGGIO
PER LA CITTÀ METROPOLITANA
DI BOLOGNA E LE PROVINCE
DI MODENA, REGGIO EMILIA E FERRARA

Bologna medieval Jewish Cemetery recovered. Destroyed in 1569, then long disappeared, it hosts 408 graves and is the largest one known in Italy so far

The extraordinary finding will be the cornerstone of a project aimed at studying and enhancing the cultural heritage and history of the Jewish community in Bologna

It's the widest medieval cemetery site ever identified in town, a witness to events that radically changed the history and life of a part of Bolognese citizens between the 14th and 16th century. At that time, for 176 years this place used to be the major burial ground of the Jewish community in Bologna, but after the papal bulls issued in the second half of the 16th century, authorizing the destruction of the Jewish cemeteries in the city, for centuries it survived only with the toponym "Jewish Garden".

Found during the archaeological excavations of 2012-2014, the Jewish cemetery discovered in Via Orfeo, in Bologna, is not only the largest one ever known in Italy, but also a unique chance for study and research. It revealed a total of 408 graves of women, men and children, some of which included personal ornaments made of gold, silver, bronze, hard stones and amber.

A working team including the Superintendence for Archaeology, Fine Arts and Landscape of the City of Bologna, the University of Bologna, the Jewish Community of Bologna, as well as freelance researchers, with the support of the Municipal Government, will try to put back together the historical events related to the cemetery, reconstructing the dynamics of settlements and the social and topographic evolution of the area. One of the primary goals of the project is to develop a "memory recovery" plan and to enhance appreciation of the Jewish cultural heritage and history of the Jewish community of Bologna.

Between 2012 and 2014, the area that was later to appear as the "lost" medieval Jewish cemetery in via Orfeo, Bologna, underwent an extensive stratigraphic archaeological excavation, carried out by the Cooperativa Archeologia in relation to the building site for a residential complex. The burial ground is located nearby the Cloister of Saint Peter Martyr, in the city block enclosed by Via Orfeo, Via de' Buttieri, Via Borgolocchi and Via Santo Stefano.

According to existing archival sources, this area was purchased in the year 1393 by a member of the Jewish family named Da Orvieto, then given to the Bolognese Jewish community to be used as a burial site. This practice was interrupted in 1569, when two Papal Bulls condemned Jewish people to be expelled from every town within the Papal domains and to be cancelled from the memory of the places where they had

lived until then. One of the most violent effects of these persecutions was the permission to destroy cemeteries and desecrate all the Jewish graves to be found in town. A true "condemnation of memory" that was only in part successful, since in the acts and registries of the following years, but most of all in the oral tradition, that area kept on being referred to as "Jewish Garden".

By the Papal Brief dated 28 November 1569, Pope Pius V donated the Jewish cemetery area to the nuns of the nearby church of Saint Peter Martyr, giving them the permission "to dig up and send, wherever they want, the bodies, bones and remains of the dead: to demolish, or convert to other forms, the graves built by the Jews, including those made for living people: to remove completely, or scrape off the inscriptions or epitaphs carved in the marble".

The archaeological excavation brought back to light the devastating effects of this papal act: about 150 graves, apparently tampered to offend the sacredness of the burials, and no trace of the tombstones that must have carried the names of the dead, as they had been probably sold or re-purposed. For example, the four beautiful Jewish gravestones now preserved and displayed at the Civic Medieval Museum of Bologna most probably came just from via Orfeo.

The cemetery area in Via Orfeo has now disclosed 408 burials perfectly aligned in parallel rows, with ditches dug in an east-west direction and heads of the dead on the west end.

The rational layout of the graves and the presence of especially precious ornaments are peculiarities which are hardly found in other cemeteries of the same period. Further investigations will allow it to study the effects given by the property transfers of the land to the Cloister of Saint Peter Martyr, also checking the possible presence of Christian burials made on the area of Jewish cemetery afterwards. The archaeological research will study both the stratigraphic process, witnessing the settlements in that area from the Copper Age to the modern times, and the objects dug out during the excavations, also making comparisons with similar Jewish cemeteries uncovered in England, France and Spain. Among the objects recovered, a special attention will be given to the many medieval jewels, which will be studied as regards their stylistic features, the technique of their creation and the meaning of their carvings. An interdisciplinary approach, integrated with the methods of archaeological, anthropological and demo-ethnic-anthropological study, will allow it to reveal some of the historical and social dynamics of the Jews in Bologna, redefining the heritage of the Jewish culture as a life experience of the Jewish community from the Middle Ages until the present time, and as an important component of the Cultural Heritage of the city. Starting from the cemetery found in via Orfeo, the project's aim is to spread the knowledge of the Jewish heritage and enhance appreciation of the symbolic historical places of the Bolognese community, thus contributing to the process of building an active and shared memory of the city.

By Soprintendenza Archeologia, belle arti e paesaggio
(Superintendence of Archeology, Fine Arts and Landscape)
for the Metropolitan City of Bologna and
the Provinces of Modena, Reggio Emilia e Ferrara (SABAP-BO)
Division of Archeology, Via Belle Arti 52 – 40126 Bologna
tel. (+39) 051 223773 – (+39) fax 051 227170

Scientific information by

Renata Curina, archeologist SABAP-BO, renata.curina@beniculturali.it
Valentina Di Stefano, archeologist SABAP-BO, valentina.distefano@beniculturali.it
Laura Buonamico, Cooperativa Archeologia, buonamico@archeologia.it

(English courtesy translation by Micaela Merli - Comune di Bologna)