A workshop of the Institute for Jewish Studies and the Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics” of the University of Münster.

The Institute for Jewish Studies was founded at the WWU in 2015 with the goal to establish a new study track in Jewish Studies expected to open in the fall 2018. Among the special foci of the institute are Jewish visual and material culture and Jewish literatures.

In the Cluster of Excellence some 200 academics from more than 20 disciplines in the humanities and social sciences and from around 14 countries deal with the relationship of religion and politics across epochs and cultures. It is nationally the largest research association of its kind and of the 43 Clusters of Excellence in Germany, it is the only one to deal with religion. The German Federal Government and the Federal States support the project with 40.1 million euros in the Excellence Initiative’s second funding phase from 2012 to 2018.

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So far there is no insight into the question what shaped Jewish attitudes to the image and to issues of visualization and visuality beyond dealings with the Second Commandment. Whereas numerous scholars pinpointed the role non-Jewish environments played in the development of Jewish art, not much is known in what way interactions with other cultures shaped not just the art itself, but Jewish dealings with images, their creation, modes of mediation, their uses, functions, and reception, in short the role images may have played in Jewish society.

Likewise, the question of what Jews saw as part of their daily lives on the streets of medieval Europe has hardly been considered. This holds both for sights on the street as well as for what was seen within holy spaces (synagogues or churches) and domestic spaces. By including material culture within a broader discussion of visual culture, we hope to understand what Jews saw and perceived on multiple levels.

The workshop brings together scholars from various fields of Jewish studies to discuss issues of the visual, visualization, material culture and the mediation of sight from a variety of view points: legal texts and responsa, philosophy, science, mysticism, exegesis, poetics, and others. We hope for insights into questions of idolatry, iconoclasm, beauty, local culture, of possible didactic functions of images and objects, of their reception and rejection.