



FISCHEL, WALTER JOSEPH

FISCHEL, WALTER JOSEPH (b. 12 November 1902; d. 14 July 1973), a scholar of Oriental Jewry and Islamic civilization. Born in Frankfurt am Main, Fischel received a degree in political science from the University of Frankfurt and a Ph.D. from the University of Giessen. He moved to Jerusalem in 1926, where he was granted a doctoral degree by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and appointed research fellow and lecturer at the Faculty of Oriental Studies. He remained with the Hebrew University until 1945. In the following year, he settled permanently in Berkeley as professor of Semitic Languages and Literature at the University of California until his retirement in 1970. Upon retirement, he was recalled as professor of Judaic studies at the University of California at Santa Cruz, where he continued teaching until his death.

A prolific scholar and a man of many interests, Fischel's main fields of research and publication centered around two major topics: (1) the history of Jewish communities in the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Indian sub-continent and (2) Islamic history and civilization. His research and publications on Jews in the Islamic lands were pioneering and significant contributions in what had been, relatively speaking, an insufficiently studied area of Jewish history and culture. Fischel's first monograph, entitled *Jews in the Economic and Political Life of Mediaeval Islam* (1937), which was later corroborated by other scholars (e.g., Goitein, 1955), shed light on the existence of an active upper-class strata of Jewish financiers, bankers, court-treasurers, and tax collectors, who, due to their skills and solidarity as a Jewish merchant class, enjoyed considerable influence as court Jews under the 'Abbasids, the



Fatimids, and the Il-khanids (10th-14th centuries).

Following a series of expeditions to various countries in North Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, and India, conducted primarily over the years 1926-45, Fischel published a considerable number of studies, articles, and reports concerning the histories and living conditions of Jewish communities in Iraq, Kurdistan, Persia, Afghanistan, and India. A large number of these publications dealt with Persian Jews, covering a broad range of topics such as their social, political, and economic history in the mediaeval and pre-modern periods (Fischel, 1937, 1950, 1982); their sacred and secular literature (1949); their religious and cultural traditions (1952); and aspects of their communal and religious life (1953).

Fischel's second area of research revolved mostly around Islamic mediaeval history and historiography. His first major work in this field was the study of the "autobiography" (*ta'rīf*) of Ebn Ḳaldūn (q.v.; 1332-1406; Fischel, 1952). A second book also devoted to Ebn Ḳaldūn (Fischel, 1967) examined in detail the manner in which Ebn Ḳaldūn's official functions, as well as his personal experience and diverse public activities, during the years he resided in Egypt had shaped the body of his historical research, methodology, and writing.

Fischel, who served as the *Encyclopaedia Judaica's* Oriental department editor, also contributed a number of essays, articles, and translations to the field of Jewish studies. He chaired the Department of Semitic Studies at Berkeley for ten years (1948-58) and was presented with numerous awards and fellowships, among them the Guggenheim Fellowship (1959-60), Resident Fulbright Fellowship in India (1963-64), Fulbright Senior Award (1971), and the University of California Humanities Award (1967-68).

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