

## Unlocking the secrets of the past: how Cambridge Festival sheds light on today's biggest issues

As political extremism, identity tensions, and migration concerns intensify, the Cambridge Festival (March 19 – April 4) emerges as a vital platform to explore how history shapes today's most pressing issues. This timely event promises fresh insights into the challenges of our time, offering a compelling opportunity for reflection and conversation.

With global debates on accountability heating up, renowned human rights lawyer Professor Philippe Sands sheds new light on historical impunity in his **upcoming book, *38 Londres Street: On Impunity? Pinochet in London and a Nazi in Patagonia*** (April 3). Launching the book at the Cambridge Festival with a [talk](#) on April 1, Sands uncovers the dark post-war life of SS officer Walther Rauff, who fled to Chilean Patagonia after WWII and became tied to Pinochet's regime. Famous for his role in the 1998 Pinochet arrest case, Sands reveals how Rauff, responsible for Holocaust atrocities, managed a crab cannery while linked to Latin American military dictatorships. *38 Londres Street* exposes the chilling legacy of Nazi war criminals in today's human rights struggles, emphasising the urgent need to confront impunity for global justice.

Sands is professor of public understanding of law at University College London and a practising barrister. He has been involved in many international cases including Pinochet and the campaigns over the Chagos Islands.

This call for accountability and justice aligns with the Cambridge Festival's broader focus on today's political landscape. As far-right populism gains momentum, the festival also features a lecture by Professor Martin A. Ruehl on March 20, titled [What is Fascism?](#) Ruehl explores the enduring appeal of fascism and the impact of historical ideologies on contemporary debates around democracy, free speech, and political accountability—echoing the critical need for reflection on both past atrocities and present-day challenges.

Meanwhile, the lecture on March 21, [New Epigraphic Discoveries from Ancient Bactria](#) by Professor Nicholas Sims-Williams, Emeritus Professor of Iranian and Central Asian Studies at SOAS University of London, explores ancient cultural exchanges. With ongoing tensions in Central Asia, especially Afghanistan, Sims-Williams' insights into Bactrian inscriptions offer valuable perspectives on evolving regional identities and conflicts. Bactria, the Greek name for the area around modern Balkh in northern Afghanistan, was home to the Bactrian language, related to Persian and Pashto but written in a Greek-based script. This language remained largely unknown until the discovery and decipherment of Bactrian documents and inscriptions over the past 30 years.

Professor Sims-Williams will show how the discovery of a new inscription of Kushan king Vima Taktu from the 2nd century CE, found in Tajikistan in 2022, has played a crucial role in the partial decipherment of a previously unread script and language, marking a significant breakthrough in the understanding of ancient Bactria and its cultural and linguistic history. Additionally, the

discovery of the Jaghori inscription, dated to the 8th century, could shed new light on the political transition from the 'Turk Shahis' to the 'Hindu Shahis.'

As the world grapples with ongoing tensions in South Asia and the Middle East, the [Cambridge Prehistory of Partitions walking tour](#) on March 21 and 22 offers insights into the historical roots of these conflicts. From Gandhi and Nehru to the Balfour Declaration and the creation of Pakistan, Cambridge played a key role in shaping colonial struggles for self-determination that led to the 1947/8 partitions of India–Pakistan and Israel–Palestine. Led by Dr Erin MB O’Halloran, author of the **new book** *East of Empire, Egypt, India and the World between the Wars (March 2025)*, the tour explores how British, Arab, Indian, and European histories intersected in Cambridge, offering a deeper understanding of the forces still shaping today’s global politics.

Coinciding with this tour, [Mary of Egypt: A Black Saint in Anglo-Saxon England?](#) on March 22 offers a timely reflection on how race, religion, and gender intersect in history. Alexandra Zhirnova’s examination of Mary of Egypt’s portrayal as a dark-skinned saint, revered in medieval England, challenges dominant narratives of race and virtue in early Christian texts. This is the beginning of the first in-depth study of this figure in Anglo-Saxon England, offering fresh insights into how race was understood in the medieval world. Zhirnova’s work resonates with today’s growing conversations about racial justice, representation, and the need for inclusive histories that reflect the diverse realities of identity in the past and present. The debate over how history remembers marginalised communities is ongoing, and Zhirnova’s talk is a timely contribution to this conversation.

Meanwhile, The [Curious Cures: Medicine in the Medieval World exhibition](#), opening March 27, explores how medieval societies approached health and disease. In light of ongoing health challenges, including those from the COVID-19 pandemic, the exhibition highlights connections between past medical practices and modern healthcare issues, from herbal remedies to surgical techniques, offering surprising parallels to today’s concerns about health, accessibility, and alternative therapies.

Dr Harry Cliff’s [The Discovery Factory: 150 Years of the Cavendish Laboratory](#) on March 27 celebrates key scientific breakthroughs, including the discovery of DNA. In the face of global challenges like climate change and rapid technological innovation, this talk highlights the Cavendish Laboratory’s legacy and its ongoing role in shaping modern science and technology.

The festival also offers a fascinating look at the intersection of ancient history, myth and modern technology. On March 26, Amélie Deblauwe, Irène Fabry-Tehranchi, and Błażej Władysław Mikuta showcase how cutting-edge digitisation, including multispectral imaging and X-ray technology, is unveiling the secrets of a 16th-century French manuscript of the [Merlin Legend](#), offering insights into fragile texts once lost to time. On March 22, Kit Treadwell offers a new perspective on King Arthur in [Who Was King Arthur?](#) During his talk, Treadwell emphasises how medieval authors adapted Arthur’s legend to engage with issues of English and Welsh identity and promote tolerance and coexistence, a theme still relevant today. Both talks highlight how modern techniques and mythic storytelling reshape our understanding of the past.

As concerns over the loss of global linguistic diversity grow, Dr Pippa Steele discusses how the preservation of ancient languages might offer a solution to the extinction of contemporary

languages. In her March 28 talk, [Can ancient dead languages save today's endangered languages? A tale of identity and visibility](#), Steele explores the intersection of ancient writing systems and modern identity, addressing how visible writing traditions in ancient societies can support the survival of endangered languages. With many of the world's languages facing extinction, her work provides critical insights into preserving cultural heritage in today's increasingly interconnected world.

Dr Steele highlights that while over half of the world's 7,000 languages are at risk, 85-90% of minority writing systems also face threats. She is currently working with an international team to preserve these scripts, leveraging research on ancient languages. Steele has launched a new resource to help communities of endangered languages assess and stabilise their writing systems.

On April 1, Professor Serafina Cuomo's talk [Accounts and Accountability in Antiquity](#) delves into the enduring legacy of ancient documents, from Athenian inscriptions to Egyptian papyri. She explores how these records connected economics and politics, drawing parallels between ancient and modern systems of trust, accountability, and governance. Using the Post Office scandal as a lens, Cuomo raises critical questions about transparency, personal authority, and the checks and balances needed in today's political landscape.

On March 26, Dr Robert Rohland's talk, [How Did the Greeks and Romans Seize the Day?](#), offers a refreshing look at how ancient cultures embraced the timeless idea of 'Carpe diem.' Using artefacts like mosaics, gems, and the oldest surviving Greek song, Rohland explores how the pursuit of joy and living in the moment shaped daily life in the ancient world—and how it still resonates today. This light-hearted yet insightful talk will appeal to anyone interested in how ancient wisdom continues to influence modern culture.

Finally, the festival is set to host a [special exhibition at the Whipple Museum](#) on March 29, celebrating women's contributions to science. Highlighting pioneers like Rosalind Franklin, whose work on DNA structure shaped modern biology, the event also honours lesser-known figures such as women astronomers and chemists. This exhibition underscores the vital role women have played in scientific progress and aligns with ongoing calls for gender equality in STEM fields.

Through these and other related events, the Cambridge Festival 2025 offers a unique opportunity to explore history's ongoing relevance in shaping our world. With expert talks and debates on topics like political ideologies, national identities, and the evolution of science and medicine, the festival fosters critical conversations on global issues and the future.

**For further details visit [www.cam.ac.uk](http://www.cam.ac.uk) | Press images are available [here](#)**

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### **About the Cambridge Festival**

The Cambridge Festival is an annual multidisciplinary event that brings together the University of Cambridge's cutting-edge research and creative thinking. Offering a diverse array of events

across science, technology, health, arts, humanities, and social sciences, the festival invites all to explore new ideas, engage with experts, and engage in conversations that shape our understanding of the world.

**About the University of Cambridge**

The University of Cambridge, founded in 1209, is one of the world's oldest and most prestigious academic institutions. With a commitment to research excellence and global impact, the university continues to lead in education and innovation across a wide range of disciplines. It remains at the forefront of scientific discovery, social progress, and cultural understanding.