

Merchant Ships and Forest Groves: Indigenous Knowledge Systems and the Archives

Guest Speaker: **Ophira Gamliel**

(University of Glasgow, visiting Professor University of
Tübingen)

13th July 2026 || 18:15-19:45 hrs

Venue: Room 3.08, Nauklerstr. 35



This talk presents work-in-progress on Ma I 279, a palm-leaf manuscript digitised by the Gundert Portal of Tübingen's manuscript library and the sole witness to the fifteenth-century Payyannūrpāṭṭu. Described as the "missing link in the evolution of Malayalam literature" (Leelavathy 1994), this Old Malayalam composition voices non-Brahminical communities — seafaring merchants, matrilineal households, artisans, midwives, ritual performers, and female ascetics — and traces a journey from the backwaters of Payyannūr to the Kaveri Delta, at the crossroads of Indian Ocean maritime networks. Composed in a region prone to environmental crisis, the text offers rich possibilities for analysing human-environment interfaces and, more broadly, Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (LINKS). While existing approaches to LINKS draw predominantly on social sciences and geography, Humanities-led methodologies remain largely unexplored. This talk argues for their significance: traditional epistemologies constitute uncoded, intergenerational knowledge co-evolving within social-ecological systems over centuries. It introduces a pilot project combining a Reading Collective Initiative (2025), digital editing tools (XML/TEI), and fieldwork, with the aim of reviving living traditions preserved in colonial archives.

About the Speaker:

Ophira Gamliel is Senior Lecturer in South Asian Religions at the University of Glasgow, where her research focuses on Kerala history and culture, Malayalam language and literature, and the history of interreligious connections across South and West Asia. She is currently a Visiting Professor in the Department of Indology at the University of Tübingen. Her work spans performance studies, Indian Ocean trade networks, and the documentation of endangered cultural heritage, on which she has published extensively. Her most recent book is *Judaism in South India, 849-1489: Relocating Malabar Jewry* (2023 ARC Humanities Press). She has secured substantial research funding from bodies including the AHRC, DFG, and the British Library's Endangered Archives Programme. Her current projects examine Hindu-Muslim-Jewish origin legends along the Malabar Coast and indigenous knowledge systems in eco-sensitive coastal zones.

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