

**LIVING ON THE EDGE
ALIENS
AND
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Of The Jews, 1066-1290**

**By
Martyn Whittock**

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IN 1210, King John arrested all the wealthy Jews in England and demanded a ransom for their release. This was a common way of extorting money from a vulnerable community which relied on royal 'protection' for its survival. However, this royal protection came at a very high price. The Crown used the Jewish community as a source of large sums of cash. These might be taken in loans or, as

in the case of John, through direct force. John had already used this method on more than one occasion, including forcing the Jewish community to make a massive contribution towards the ransom earlier paid to gain the release of Richard I.

The sum John demanded in 1210 was huge and came to 66,000 marks. The mark was a unit of account and worth two-thirds of a pound (or 13 shillings and 4 pence). The amount demanded therefore came to £44,000.

In Bristol the Jewish community was imprisoned in the castle until the money demanded was produced. The chronicler, Roger of Wendover, recorded the story of one 'Jew of Bristol' who refused to pay his ransom. The sum demanded from this unfortunate Jewish resident was 10,000 marks, or £6,600. Faced with his refusal to give in to this royal blackmail, the king ordered the royal torturers to work. Their brief was to pull out one of the Jew's molar teeth every day, until he paid the 10,000 marks. Each day, for seven days, the Jewish merchant, named Abraham of Bristol in some accounts, had one of his teeth pulled from his mouth

using pliers and without the benefit of any substance to subdue the pain. And still he held out against his tormentors. On the eighth day, the torturers began preparation to rip out the eighth tooth. As they set to their bloody task, Abraham of Bristol finally gave way. After a week of excruciating pain he could take no more. He agreed to pay the sum demanded. Utterly vulnerable — as was the entire Jewish community — he could turn to no one for assistance or protection. He was living 'on the edge' in an increasingly hostile society.

William of Malmesbury records that the English Jewish community first appeared in the reign of William the Conqueror when he transferred a community from Rouen to England. In return for rights of residence and royal protection, Jews paid huge taxes to the Crown. Within the economy they were merchants, pawnbrokers and financiers. Among the goods they traded were precious metals, furs and jewelry. Within the financial sector their role included money lending at interest: an occupation prohibited to Christians by the Church.



Around 1093, Gilbert Crispin (left), the Abbot of Westminster, published a record of his debate with a Jew, entitled Disputation of a Jew with a Christian about the Christian Faith. In it he revealed a friendly and open attitude towards the Jewish scholar: 'he was well versed even in our law and literature, and had a mind practiced in the Scriptures and in disputes against us. He often used to come to me as a friend both for business and to see me, since in certain things I was very necessary to him, and as often as we came together we would soon get talking in a friendly spirit about the Scriptures and our faith.'

It was at this time that an attempt was made to introduce the legal principle. (already seen on the Continent) that all Jews were the 'king's property'. During Henry I's reign (1100-1135) a royal charter was granted to Joseph, the Chief Rabbi of London, and his followers. Under this charter, Jews were permitted to move about the country without paying tolls, they could buy and sell goods and property, in legal cases they were to be tried by their peers and oaths were to be sworn on the

Torah rather than on the Bible. Special weight was attributed to a Jew's oath, which was **valid against that of twelve Christian Englishmen.**

However, despite this promising start this vulnerable community often experienced periods of persecution. These attacks were often



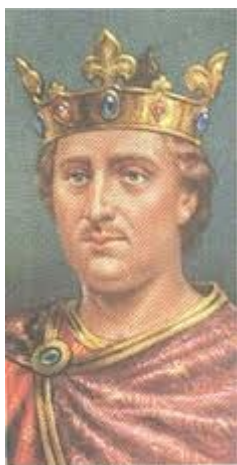
centred on accusations of coin clipping and ritual murder of Christian children: the Blood Libel. These periodic accusations led to violent attacks on Jewish communities which usually ended with the payment of a huge fine to the Crown. There were three particularly famous Blood Libel cases. The first in Europe was the accusation that Jews had murdered

a boy named William in Norwich (1144), who was later described as 'St' William of Norwich. This accusation was followed by that of 'St' Harold of Gloucester (1167) and Little 'St' Hugh of Lincoln (1255). Each of these dead children became the object of a cult of veneration at the cathedrals in these towns.

The first 'Blood Libel' occurred at a time of particular vulnerability, due to heightened ethnic tension following the First Crusade and political instability in England during the Civil War between Stephen and the Empress Matilda. Stephen burned down the house of a Jew in Oxford (some accounts add with the owner in it) because he refused to pay a contribution to the king's expenses, but otherwise attacks on Jews in England were, according to the Jewish chroniclers, prevented by Stephen.

Despite this vulnerability the Jewish community prospered. Within five years of the accession of Henry II, in 1154, Jews are recorded as resident in Bristol, Bungay, Cambridge, Gloucester, Lincoln, London, Northampton, Norwich, Oxford, Thetford, Winchester and York. However, they could only bury in London. This was a restriction which lasted until 1177. The financial importance of the Jewish community is seen in the fact that

Strongbow's conquest of Ireland (1170) was financed by the Jewish financier Josce of Gloucester. Generally Henry II put few obstacles in the way of Jewish financial activities. However, in 1186, when raising money to pay for the crusade against Saladin, Henry took a 'tithe' (amounting to £70,000) from his English Christian subjects but a 'quarter' (valued at £60,000) from the English Jewish community. This enormous imposition assessed the Jewish community as being in possession of 25 per cent of the total movable wealth of the kingdom. This may partly reflect the real wealth of the community but more likely reveals the way in which the Jewish community was vulnerable to crippling extortion.



Henry was probably encouraged to do this by the huge amount of money which had gone to the Crown following the death of the Jewish financier Aaron of Lincoln. This had occurred because regulations stipulated that estates based on usury passed to the Crown on the death of the estate owner. It was Aaron who had loaned money to help pay for the building of the cathedrals at Lincoln and Peterborough and his estate (including £15,000 of debts owed to him) and a large treasure all passed to the Crown on his death. This amounted to 75 per cent of the usual annual government revenue — a vast sum in the hands of one man. A special branch of the Treasury was set up to deal with this large account and was called 'Aaron's Exchequer'. The treasure was shipped to France to help pay for the war Henry was waging against the king of France, but was lost at sea in February 1187.

Following Henry II's death, there were serious attacks on Jewish people at Richard I's coronation in 1189, which was followed by attacks at Colchester, Lynn, Norwich, Stamford and Thetford. At Lincoln, Jews took refuge in the castle. At Dunstable only accepting baptism saved the community from being murdered. The most terrible attack occurred at York on the nights of 16 March (the day of the Jewish feast of Shabbat ha-Gadol, the Sabbath before Passover) and 17 March 1190. The Jews of York were alarmed by massacres elsewhere in England and by a murder-

ous attack on the family of the late Benedict of York, killing his widow and children, setting their house on fire and carrying away Benedict's treasure. Benedict had earlier died in Northampton of wounds caused by attacks on Jews at the coronation of Richard I. Those who murdered his family and looted his house in York were led by Richard Malebisse, who had borrowed money from the Jews of York.



The Crypt of York Minster

The leader of the Jewish community in York, Josce, asked the warden of York Castle to protect them and the Jewish community were allowed into Clifford's Tower. However, the tower was besieged by a mob, demanding that the Jews convert to Christi-

anity and be baptized. Trapped in the castle, the Jews were advised by their religious leader, Rabbi Yomtob of Joigny, to kill themselves rather than convert. Josce began the mass suicide by killing his wife, Anna and their two children and he was then killed by Yomtob. The father of each family followed suit, killing his wife and children and then Yomtob stabbed the men before killing himself. A small number of Jews who did not kill themselves surrendered to the mob at daybreak on 17 March. After leaving the castle, on a promise that they would not be harmed, they were also killed. Malebisse and his murderous mob then went to York Minster where they seized the financial records of the Jewish community (deposited there for safe keeping) and burnt them.

The persecution did not end there. When Richard I was imprisoned on his way back to England from the crusade, the Jewish community was loaded with a disproportionate amount of the taxation to be raised. They were forced to contribute 5,000 marks toward the king's ransom — over three times as much as the contribution of the City of London. On Richard's return the Ordinance of the Jewry (1194) ordered a tighter regulation of

Jewish financial transactions, which finally led to the establishment of the Exchequer of the Jews. This made all the transactions of English Jews liable to taxation by the king of England, who thus became a silent partner in all the transactions of Jewish money lending. The king also demanded two bezants (gold coins of variable value) in the pound; that is, 10 per cent of all sums recovered by the Jews through royal courts.



The increasing persecution was encouraged on 15 July 1205, when the pope laid down the principle that Jews were doomed to perpetual servitude because they had crucified Jesus. Earlier, in 1198, Pope Innocent III (left) had written to all Christian princes, including Richard I of England, calling upon them to stop the charging of interest on money loaned by Jews to Christians. The new English king, John, at first treated Jews with tolerance. He confirmed the charter of Rabbi Josce and his sons

and made it apply to all the Jews of England. He ordered the authorities in London to prevent attacks on Jews. He reappointed a Jew named Jacob as 'archpriest' of all the English Jews (12 July 1199). However, this did not last. In 1210 John demanded the sum of £100,000 from the religious houses of England, and 66,000 marks from the Jews. It was then that Abraham of Bristol refused to pay his quota of 10,000 marks and had seven of his teeth extracted until he finally agreed to pay.

This persecution, terrible as it was, was not continuous. The reigns of Henry II (1154-89) and the period of the minority of Henry III (1216-27) were peaceful times for the English Jewish community. However, when Henry III came of age this policy of relative toleration was reversed. The trend was already moving that way. The Third Lateran Council of 1179 had declared that no Jew should employ a Christian and that, in any matter of dispute, a Christian's testimony would always be accepted against that of a Jew. In 1215 Pope Innocent III went further, at the Fourth Lateran Council, and passed a law forcing all Jews to wear a badge. In 1218 Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury, brought it into operation in England. This badge took the form of an oblong white patch of two by four finger-lengths. The Synod of Oxford, 1222, barred Jews from



employing Christian women and from building any new synagogues, and ordered that they would have to pay tithes despite not being members of the Church. In 1239 and 1244 Pope Gregory IX (left) condemned the Jewish Talmud as blasphemous and heretical and set the Church up as the deciding authority of what was acceptable within Judaism. Jewish books which were deemed unacceptable were seized and burned. This was an important step in the increasing radicalisation of anti-Jewish action, since it claimed that Jews had abandoned the Old Testament faith (by the creation of the beliefs and commentaries in the Talmud) and so were no longer eligible for the limited toleration previously allowed them. It accompanied a twelfth-century shift away from the tradition-

al Church view that the Jews had rejected Christ out of spiritual blindness, and replaced it with the interpretation (which was not itself new) that they had wilfully rejected Jesus despite recognizing him as the Messiah and had therefore become heretics against the faith of the Old Testament and allies of the devil. This campaign against the Jews was headed by the new Dominican order who, as the military campaigns of the crusades declined in the thirteenth century, took up a kind of crusade against those defined as 'heretics' living within Christian societies. In 1221 the Dominican friars were given land inside the Oxford Jewry as part of a campaign to convert the Jews. The Franciscan friars played a similar role. This accompanied new assertions of papal power which were also supported by these preaching orders of friars.

Taking their cue from the papal actions, local communities made their own contributions to ethnic cleansing. Petitions were sent to the king to remove his Jews and they were expelled from Newcastle (1234), Wycombe (1235), Southampton (1236), Berkhamsted (1242) and Newbury (1244). Henry, in an attempt to raise money, sold the Jewish community to his brother Richard of Cornwall, in 1255, for 5,000 marks, and lost all rights over it for a year. In the following August a number of leading

Jews, who had gathered at Lincoln to celebrate a marriage, were seized on a charge of having murdered a boy named Hugh. Ninety-one were sent to London. Of these, 18 were executed for refusal to plead and the rest were kept in prison till the expiry of Richard of Cornwall's control over their property. Clearly, the whole Jewish community was becoming increasingly vulnerable. In January 1275 Jews were expelled from the lands of Queen Dowager Eleanor. To this general atmosphere of increasing racial hatred Henry III seems to have made a personal and active anti-Jewish contribution. His sanctioning of an accusation of ritual murder against the Jewish community (regarding Little 'St' Hugh of Lincoln) was the first time an official 'green light' had been given to these racially motivated accusations. Similarly, it was his son — Edward I who, in 1276, was to revive an accusation of ritual murder against London's Jewish community; a charge which had been ignored by the authorities when it was first made in 1272.



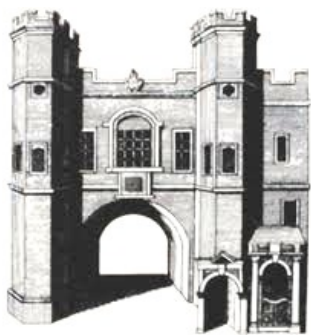
As political order broke down between Henry III (left) and the supporters of Simon de Montfort, actions against the Jews escalated. Between 1263 and 1265 the Jewries at Cambridge, Canterbury, Lincoln, London, Northampton, Winchester and Worcester were all looted. In addition, Simon de Montfort (who had already expelled the Jews from Leicester) annulled all debts to the Jews. By this time the king and others were shifting most of their transactions to Italian bankers who were extending their influence in England.

ence in England.

Under Edward I the persecution of the Jews intensified. His 'Statute of the Jews' (1275) made it illegal for Jews to lend money at interest; something Italian bankers were allowed to do, having been exempted from the general condemnation of usury, and were increasingly doing to their great profit. This impoverished the whole Jewish community and this economic marginalization was a prelude to total expulsion. In 1278 the entire English Jewish community was imprisoned and 293 Jews were executed at London, allegedly for coin clipping. The Synod of Exeter in

1287 added to previous discriminatory practices by banning Jews and Christians from eating together, banning Jewish doctors from treating Christian patients and forbidding Jews from leaving their houses during the Easter festival. Christians who mixed with Jews would be excommunicated.

On 18 July 1290 Edward issued writs to the sheriffs of all the English counties ordering them to enforce a decree that all Jews should leave England before All Saints' Day of that year (1 November). They were allowed to carry their portable property but their houses passed to the king, except in the case of a few favoured people who were allowed to sell theirs before they left. Somewhere in the region of 4,000 Jews were expelled. It is difficult to be precise on numbers, but in the 1280's about 1,100 paid a poll tax placed on all Jewish males over the age of 12 years. After 1290 there would not be a Jewish community in England again until the 1640's, when some Spanish and Portuguese Jewish merchants (living as Christians but secretly practicing Judaism) lived in London. It was not until 1656 that they could live openly as members of the Jewish faith.



There is very little archaeological evidence for England's medieval Jewish community, although there is a lot of evidence in tax records. Living in some 26 towns and enjoying the same material culture as their Christian neighbours, these Jewish communities are hard to spot in the archaeological record. Medieval Jewish cemeteries have been excavated at London, Winchester and York. The London example (at Cripplegate - left)

had all the graves emptied and desecrated after 1290. London's city walls have been found to contain six fragments of reused tombstones with Hebrew texts. Similarly, fragments of Jewish gravestones were found in the foundations of the Guildhall in Cambridge. Part of another one was reused in a medieval cellar wall in Northampton. Buildings which were probably constructed by Jewish merchants survive in 'Jew's House', Lincoln, Wensum Lodge', Norwich, and part of a building under the

County Hotel in Canterbury. In London the Jewish community lived in the area known as 'the Jewry'. This was not a ghetto and Jews and Christians lived alongside each other here, close to the main trading and financial centre of the city. This area is commemorated in the street name Old Jewry and the name of a church, St Lawrence Jewry.

Given the rarity of archaeological evidence, the discovery of London's first Medieval mikveh (plural mikva'ot) — Jewish ritual bath — in 1986 during excavations in Gresham Street was particularly significant. A subterranean structure, it was lined with ashlar blocks and pottery dated it to the twelfth century. At first it was suggested it might be a strong room, but no other evidence for such a structure exists from medieval London. Interestingly, it was not in a synagogue but at the rear of a private house. However, this is similar to a type of small mikveh identified in Germany. In 2001 a second was found at Milk Street. Pottery dated this one to the mid-thirteenth century. Jewish ritual law dictates that the first 40 seah (c.750 litres, or 164.9 Imperial gallons) in a ritual bath must be spring water or rainwater, collected in cisterns and channelled to the mikveh. This must have been used in these two cases since neither was deep enough to reach groundwater.'

The Milk Street mikveh was owned by Jewish financiers, the Crespins, until 1290 and there were other Jewish occupiers of houses around the Gresham Street site. It is not possible to tell whether these two mikva'ot were built for private, or communal, use but they are fascinating and poignant reminders of a vanished community — a community which played such an important role within England between 1066 and 1290, including providing the financial capital to pay for palaces, cathedrals and the monastic building projects of the Cistercians in Yorkshire.

NOTE: The author of this book was obviously sympathetic to the Jews, but nevertheless it is a good record of how we became plagued by Jews up to the present day because of the greed of previous monarchs who were relying on the Jews to finance their wars.

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