

CHAPTER 4B

ENGLAND

Medieval English Jewry emerged out of northwestern France, and it seems that Jews did not settle in England before the Norman Conquest. Like the earlier invitation from Baldwin of Flanders to the Jew Jacob ben Yekutiel, King William the Conqueror invited Jews from his Norman lands to settle in England. In other words, the settlement of Jews in England began much later (and ended earlier) than the mother settlements of Jews in northern France.

The newer English Jewry had many similar characteristics to its northern-French ancestor, but in every aspect, their situation was more extreme. While Northern-French Jews were immigrants and widely perceived as such, English Jews were associated with the new Norman monarchy, meaning they were part of the conquering class that had been imposed on the English people. Northern-French Jewry was limited in its economic outlets, and over the twelfth century, it gradually moved into the useful but dangerous specialty of moneylending. However, English Jewry was even more limited, specializing in the banking business since its very beginning. Northern-French Jews eventually became deeply dependent on the French monarchy, as the regional rulers of northern France lost their grip on the Jews. This was unlike the English Jews who, from the beginning “belonged” to the kings of England, while the local barons only rarely gained control of them. In northern France, due to the combination of the banking business and growing royal control, there was a potential for considerable exploitation by the king of Jewish wealth in northern France. And the combination of the Jews’ newcomer status, traditional Christian anti-Jewish attitudes, Jewish moneylending, and the alliance with the monarchy resulted in hostility toward the Jews among the general population. All these factors were amplified in England, and so royal exploitation of Jewish wealth, and hostility toward the Jews was more intense compared to northern France.

One striking difference concerns the cultural legacy of these communities. As we have seen, northern Jewry, especially in the eleventh, twelfth, and early thirteenth centuries, was remarkably creative. This creativity was especially impressive as it emerged early in the development of these communities. English Jewry, however, shows nothing like this northern-French cultural creativity. Culturally, English Jewry was nothing more than the backwater of northern-French Jewry.

A second distinction between these two communities impacts our knowledge of their histories. As noted before, royal record keeping and bureaucracy developed in France in the thirteenth century. However, the English kings were far ahead of the French in these respects. Their bureaucracy and archives developed much earlier and more comprehensively. As a result, the English monarchy's records provide both a longer timeline *and* more details. These non-Jewish English documents are literally hundreds of times more extensive than those in France and are substantially more useful in reconstructing the history of twelfth- and thirteenth-century English Jewry.

Already in the twelfth century, a special office for Jewish affairs had been set up in England, the "Exchequer of the Jews" (the Jews' Treasury Department). Five volumes of thirteenth century legal recordings of this *Exchequer of the Jews* have been published. This makes English Jewry the best documented Jewish community of thirteenth century western Christendom. Moreover, all other government records are full of references to Jewish issues, not to mention Church documents. On the other hand, there are very few Jewish documents that inform us of Jewish communities in the medieval England, a stark contrast with the high number of non-Jewish sources concerning Jews.

As a result of extensive governmental and ecclesiastical documentation, historians have been able to reconstruct a much more complete picture of the medieval English Jewish community in medieval western Christendom during the twelfth and thirteenth century. English medievalists have shown an early and continual interest in the Jews of medieval England. Already in the eighteenth century, Blossier de Tovey, an English clergyman and later Principal of New Inn Hall, Oxford, composed an elaborate history of medieval English Jewry for which he utilized the records that we mentioned previously. Much of the documentation of the Exchequer of the Jews has been published by distinguished English medievalists and many of these scholars have reconstructed aspects of medieval English Jewry history. Recent examples include H.G Richardson, who wrote a significant study of the English Jews at the end of the twelfth and into the early thirteenth century, R.B Dobson who contributed several valuable studies of specific Jewish communities, Robert Stacey who broadened our knowledge of Jewish fortunes during the reign of Henry III, and Robert Mundill who has described the expulsion of 1290 in great detail. Paradoxically, the lack of Jewish documentation has made it easier for general medievalists to focus on the Jews of England from the eleventh through thirteenth centuries. Because of their research, we are at least fully informed about the material circumstances of the Jews of England during these centuries than we are for any other European Jewish community.

Towards the end of the twelfth century, governmental documents start becoming quite copious. For the first century of English Jewish history (1060s to 1150s), the situation was very similar to that of northern France with minimum data available. Nonetheless, the bits and pieces of information that we do have depicts an immigrant Jewish community originally limited to a number of major towns but slowly expanding, a set of Jewish settlements developing under royal protection, economic specialization in money trade, and considerable hostility from the general population.

The earliest record of the royal treasury for Jewish affairs already dates from 1131, the 31st year of King Henry I. It already shows proof of several wealthy Jewish money lenders. These wealthy Jewish businessmen are often described as being assisted by the king in collecting what they were owed. At the same time, the records indicate that they were not always paid the money that was owed to them as sometimes the debtors could pay an amount to the crown instead of paying off the Jewish moneylender. The driving motivation in each of these scenarios was profit for the king. In some cases, the records show that Jewish businessmen paid money to the crown. What these payments were for is unclear. Perhaps it was part of a procedure connected to Jewish business, or maybe a (concealed) payment for royal protection.

There are good reasons to assume that hostility toward the Jewish immigrants started early on: their immigration status, the traditional teachings of the Church, limited business options, and those options available (moneylending) being problematic, and their alliance with the foreign monarchs. The early Norman kings were successful in suppressing this hostility. However, in times of an unstable government – such as the civil war in the 1140s between King Stephen and Empress Mathilda with opportunity for combatants and civilians to take advantage of Jewish vulnerability – the Jews found themselves in a dangerous situation.

The Norwich incident of the 1140s shows us how deep this hatred was rooted. But it also shows that not everyone was anti-Jewish, and that the government was mostly able to protect the Jews from violent outbursts. An example of this took place in 1144 Norwich during Eastertime. The mutilated body of a young tanner named William was discovered. Suspicion focused on the Jews, at least among part of Norwich's Christian population. However, it is important to note that it is clear from the written account of the event that many of the people of Norwich did not believe that the Jews had anything to do with the murder. In any case, the local sheriff successfully protected the Jews of Norwich from Christian violence.

The suspicion among some residents of Norwich that the Jews had killed the young boy involved the belief that the one true motive for the crime was Jewish hate for Christ and Christianity. The victim seems to have been an outstanding boy, thus suggesting the lack of any reasonable motive for the killing. The belief that William had died because of Jewish hostility made the victim of the alleged crime into a martyr for his Christian faith. Being considered a martyr, William's gravesite was revered, and miracles were soon reported to have taken place there. Once again, the residents of Norwich were divided in their opinion on the William's saintliness – some were convinced of his martyrdom, others were uncertain and again, others were sure that he was not a martyr or a saint. Some years later, a new cleric by the name of William of Monmouth undertook the task of proving William's saintliness. For Thomas, there were three indications of William's saintliness – his blessed and impeccable childhood, his death as a martyr by Jewish hands, and the miracles associated with his gravesite. Clearly, the middle indicator – his death as a martyr– was key to Thomas's case, and he stretched the story of William's death into great detail.

According to Thomas's unsubstantiated story, the Jews of Norwich had lured the unsuspecting young boy into their clutches and then assaulted him. The narrator describes alleged Jewish savagery in detail. He claims that the Jews "were so cruel and so eager to inflict pain that it was difficult to say whether they were more cruel or more inventive in their tortures." The described tortures already suggest overtones of the suffering of Jesus. Thomas proceeds to make the identification with Jesus obvious: "Thus, while the enemies of Christ were rioting in a spirit of malignity around the boy, some of those present decided to fix him to a cross in mockery of the Lord's Passion, as though they would say: 'Just like we condemned Christ to a shameful death, so let us condemn this Christian!'" The emotional impact of this description is of course shattering, making powerfully Thomas's case for William's martyrdom and thereby his saintliness.

The belief that the Jews murdered a Christian youngster through crucifixion triggered a new phase in the history of Christian anti-Jewish attitude. It must be emphasized that Thomas's account was felt necessary because some of the Norwich townsmen did not believe that the Jews were murderers who hated Christians and did not accept the sainthood of William. England was where the very first allegation of religiously grounded Jewish murder of innocent Christians occurred as well as the claim of crucifixion or ritual murder. The Christian anger over this alleged crime did not result in anti-Jewish violence; the local sheriff succeeded in protecting the Jews that lived under his jurisdiction.

The long and mostly peaceful reign of Henry II (1154-1189) provided the setting for further maturation of English Jewry, its business, and the alliance with the monarchy. At the beginning of Henry II's reign, Jewish settlements were identified in fourteen English towns. By the end of his reign, the number of English towns with Jewish residents had doubled. At the same time, the demographic, business, and political successes also strengthened the dislike of the Jews among the general population.

The expansion of Jewish settlement was closely related to the prosperity of Jewish business. From the reign of Henry II, we have more and more evidence of Jewish involvement in banking. Especially striking is the emergence of extremely successful Jewish financiers. Some of these included: Brun of London, Isaac of London, the brothers Jurnet and Benedict of Norwich, Vives of Cambridge, and Moses of Bristol. These financiers often worked together in powerful firms. Of all the successful Jewish moguls in the late 12th century, the most important was Aaron of Lincoln. According to the historian Cecil Roth, "when he died, about 1186, Aaron of Lincoln was probably the wealthiest person in England, in liquid assets." The list of people he lent to is impressive; it includes counts, earls, archbishops, bishops, abbots, and towns. Like some of his fellow financiers, he often lent money to the king in exchange for a lien on taxes. The amounts of money involved in Aaron's business were staggering. After his death, the crown took possession of all his property. A special office called *Scaccarium Aaronis* was established by the royal comptroller, responsible for tracing and collecting outstanding payments to the deceased Aaron of Lincoln. The work of this special office lasted for almost a decade, but with little success. However, even that limited success greatly enriched the royal treasury.

More generally, the business success of English Jewry in the 12th century brought considerable revenue for the monarchy. The special arrangement for Aaron of Lincoln's estate was unusual; exploitation of Jewish wealth was not. The methods of exploitation of Jewish funds included taxation, fines for actual or suspected violations, and special assessments. The first of these assessments happened in 1159, on the occasion of a royal expedition to southern France. The last one within Henry II's reign was in the late 1180s, when Henry was about to go on a Crusade. In this instance, the Jews in England were taxed a quarter of their assets, with the intention of raising the enormous sum of 60,000 pounds.

The combination of a growing Jewish presence, increased contact between Jews and the Christian population, the success of Jewish businesses, and the Jews' dependence on Henry II and his

court, increased the public's hostility toward the Jews. In effect, when the monarchy put pressure on its Jews through taxation or assessments, this pressure was ultimately felt by those who were in debt to Jewish lenders. To meet the king's demands, Jews were forced to call in debts owed to them. As a result, Jews became a tool for royal access to Christian funds. Serving as an agent for royal fiscal pressure did not exactly make the Jews beloved among an already hostile population.

The allegation of a Jewish hatred of Christianity that was believed to be so intense that it led to the murder of innocent Christians – an allegation that had first come up in 1144 in Norwich – appeared on a regular basis during the reign of Henry II. It was brought up in Gloucester in 1168, in Bury St. Edmunds in 1181, and in Bristol in 1183. In any case, memorials were set up for the purported young martyrs, thus perpetuating and spreading the allegation. Once again, the authorities seem to have efficiently protected the endangered Jews, with no known reports of revenge.

Royal protection of Jews became rapidly less effective under the rule of Richard the Lionheart, the successor of Henry II. There were two likely factors for the outbreak of violence during Richard's rule. The first cause was intense propaganda on behalf of the crusades, which, as has been shown before, potentially endangers the safety of Jews. From the very first time there was massive preaching on behalf of a crusading campaign to free Jerusalem and the Holy Sepulcher (Jesus' grave), it became clear that a message to liberate the shrine that commemorates Jesus' suffering aroused Christian hatred toward the Jews who were believed to have been responsible for his death. The second suspected cause was the absence of the king during his crusading expedition which weakened the effectiveness of agencies that had previously protected the English Jews.

The first outbreak of violence against the Jews took place while King Richard was still in England. It occurred at the time of the crowning festivities of late 1189. A deputation of English Jewish leaders presented itself at Westminster Hall and was rudely rejected by a guard. This seems to have set anti-Jewish rioting around the coronation hall. When this rioting was reported back in London as being to the king's liking, it triggered fierce attacks on the Jewish quarter of London. This incident was worrisome, as was the king's weak reaction after the violent outburst.

Much more widespread anti-Jewish violence erupted when Richard embarked on his crusading journey in early 1190. Attacks took place in Lynn, Norwich, Stamford, Lincoln, Bury St. Edmunds, and possibly other locations. The most atrocious assault took place in York. The catastrophe started with assaults on the homes of prominent Jews. The people found in these residences were murdered, their

belongings were robbed, and their buildings were set on fire. Most of York's Jews quickly made their way to the royal stronghold. Because of a catastrophic misunderstanding between these Jews and the local sheriff, the sheriff went to reclaim the castle and removed the endangered Jews. Inspired by a northern-French Jewish spiritual leader, most of the Jews in the castle chose to die as martyrs for their religion (through suicide) over falling into the hands of their attackers. Those who chose to live came out with the intention to convert to Christianity. As we will see in more detail later, Jewish were usually spared in such situations. This was not the case, however, in York, where the potential converts were killed by the sword. The final stage in this atrocity was an assault on the cathedral where the Jewish bonds were kept. The bonds were found and destroyed, allowing many people in the area to free themselves of their debts to the Jews.

While the earlier breach of peace in 1189 did not receive a strong royal response, the violence of 1190 did. Royal troops were sent in, arrests were made, fines were imposed, and property was confiscated. A few years later, after Richard's return from the crusade, a more thorough investigation was launched to regain the losses during the wave of anti-Jewish attacks. More importantly, in 1194, far-reaching changes were instituted to protect Jewish business and – perhaps more importantly – to ensure governmental knowledge and exploitation of that business. Record centers for Jewish business were established, with strict rules for the registration of Jewish loans. All Jewish contracts had to be written in duplicate, with one copy kept in royal archives. Two Christians, two Jews, and two clerks were assigned to monitor Jewish business activity. While one goal was to protect the Jews, a more important goal was to secure the government's profit from Jews. As a result, Jewish business became ever more transparent to royal authorities, with the obvious potential for more effective exploitation of Jewish wealth. Following the setup of this structure, any attempt to impose special taxes or assessments on Jews would take place after closing these centers and an examination of the records to determine what Jewish resources could be tapped. Over the next decade, this new structure grew into the powerful and influential "Exchequer of the Jews", whose valuable records have already been mentioned.

The unstable reign of King John – 1199 to 1216 – was disastrous for England in general. For example, we already mentioned the loss of the crown's Norman possessions, which was just as much of a victory for the French monarchy as it was a defeat for England. Conflict with the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church and a series of military setbacks increased the sense of catastrophe. Under such circumstances, many elements in English society suffered, among them the Jews. For a monarchy under enormous financial stress, the Jews were an easy target. Since they were so heavily dependent on the

crown, it was easy for them to be exploited. The abuse had only become worse with the establishment of the new bureaucracy in the wake of the 1189-1190 turbulence.

During the reign of King John, the earlier practice of exempting people who were in debt to the Jews for a fee intensified. So, while the Jewish moneylenders were losing significant sums, the crown gained much-needed revenue. In addition to this, fines of extraordinary sums were being imposed on individual Jews, for example on the wealthy Jewish financier Isaac of Norwich. Furthermore, a series of tallages or assessments were imposed, demanding huge sums from the Jews. Specifically harsh was the tallage of 1210. The Jews of the kingdom were arrested, and their records, which were now fully available, were carefully studied. Concluding that the Jews had been withholding information and revenue, the king ordered a massive assessment and specified drastic measures for its collection. Once again, we must remember that such pressure on the Jews automatically translated into Jewish pressure on Christian debtors. When money had to be produced, it could only be obtained by squeezing those in debt to the Jews. Thus, such tallages were doubly disastrous. They impoverished the Jews and, at the same time, increased the already widespread hostility toward them.

This issue of owing debt to Jews is also addressed in the Magna Carta. In this document, King John had to make concessions to the local rulers, which is often seen as one of the major steps towards the democratic system in modern-day England. The reason why Jews are mentioned is to protect debtors from certain kinds of exploitation from Jewish moneylenders. These clauses in the Magna Carta show concern with Jewish moneylending and its repayment, concerns very much heightened by the devastation during the reign of King John.

The succession to King Henry III seemed promising for stability. His reign from 1216-1272 was one of the longest in English history. Overall, his reign did bring stability for the general population and the Jews. However, the tendency to support Jews to exploit them remained. Jewish businesses were closely monitored for the Jew's protection but also out of concern for royal revenue. The exploitation of Jewish businesses got so excessive that the Jewish community in England became impoverished and this exploitation led to its eventual downfall.

At the beginning of the reign of the new king, some of the suffering during the last years of King John was reversed. Imprisoned Jews were released, and confiscated bonds were returned to them. As preparations for a new crusade began, precautions were taken to make sure that the rioting that played a role during Richard's crusading would not happen again. All of these were hopeful signs.

Early on in Henry's reign, there was one development that foreshadowed new difficulties for the Jews which included pressure from the Church to introduce some of the innovations that had been evolving. We have seen before that the Third and Fourth Lateran Councils had introduced measures to further segregate the Jews. Particularly striking was the introduction of distinguished clothing for Jews, making them recognizable at all times as Jews. The Fourth Lateran Council had also introduced measures to protect Christian lenders from some of the excesses associated within the Jewish banking business. The royal court adopted the policy of segregation: In 1218, a royal order ordained the wearing of recognizable clothing by Jews, a very early example of nonreligious support for the ecclesiastical innovation. However, it did not support the Church's efforts to limit Jewish business or to bring Jewish business issues under the jurisdiction of the Church. The Provincial Council of Canterbury, held in 1222, passed many of the new rules of the Third and Fourth Lateran Councils, even going as far as to prohibit all relations with the Jews of the province, a step that would have made Jewish existence impossible. The royal authorities reacted fiercely against this and forbade Christians of the province to abide by the limitations on contact with Jews.

Growing missionary efforts by the Church to convert the Jews became deeply ingrained in England, as well. Early on during King Henry III's reign, Dominican and Franciscan monks began to settle within or near Jewish neighborhoods to bring the Christian message to the Jews. In 1232, a *Domus conversorum*, a home for Jewish converts to Christianity, was built with royal support outside of London. The missionaries worked tirelessly trying to convert Jews and for the rest of the thirteenth century, the *Domus conversorum* became a typical institution within English society.

Alongside pressures from the Church came growing hostility among the general population. As we have seen, several factors had caused the Christians in England to adopt negative views of the Jews. Before, the royal authorities had mostly been successful in protecting the Jews against attacks. During the reign of Henry III, violent incidents became more frequent while the authorities began supporting some of the charges. For instance, in 1234, a number of Norwich Jews were accused of circumcising a young Christian. The case was transferred from the royal court to a Church court which convicted some of the accused and sentenced them to death. At the same time, Norwich experienced anti-Jewish riots.

Such false accusations against Jews became more common. The most notable of these took place in Lincoln in 1255 when the body of a young Christian boy named Hugh was found. A Jew named Copin was tortured until he confessed to murdering the boy. Once King Henry III arrived, Copin was

immediately hanged, and a large number of Lincoln Jews were brought to London for trial. When eighteen Jews demanded a mixed jury of Christians and Jews, they were executed right away. The others were tried and convicted but eventually released. The story of Little St. Hugh of Lincoln became a popular medieval English folk tale. Through royal support of the ritual murder allegation and widespread circulation of the story, the negative imagery of Jews in England deteriorated further.

While the accelerating ecclesiastical and pressure from the people and responses from royalty were significant, the most important development of King Henry III's reign, however, was the taxation policy that was changed during the late 1230s together with the growing control of the monarch and the king's newly appointed advisors. Henry III's taxation policy has been studied extensively by Robert Stacey. Stacey suggests that before 1239, the taxation of Jews provided a steady flow of income for Henry III of between 2000 and 3000 marks per year. However, this balanced and somewhat moderate practice changed radically in 1239 when Henry III demanded a third of all Jewish chattels, including the value of all their unredeemed bonds. This seizure of Jewish property was followed by the payment of heavy sums to the king for the Jews to redeem their possessions. As in previous cases seen before, the Jewish archives were closed, and Jewish holdings were carefully examined. In this instance, it seems, however, that the king's benefits were disappointing.

The next year (1240), this disappointment resulted in a more radical effort to exploit the benefits of Jewish wealth. The Jewish records were closed once more with a full-scale investigation of Jewish holdings, combined with a census of all Jews in England aged twelve or more. All this led to the convening of an assembly of Jewish representatives in Worcester in February of 1241 and the announcement of a heavy assessment of 20,000 marks. This 'tallage' was to be paid in two installments, with Jews in charge of collecting it. In 1244 a second tallage was imposed of 60,000 marks, to be collected through 1250. Robert Stacey concludes that the huge assessments ruined the rich Jews of England and destroyed the class system of Anglo-Jewry. King Henry thereby broke the financial backbone of the English Jewish community and permanently ruined its value to the Crown. The way Jews were increasingly reliant on the rulers for security and business dealings, and the increasing transparency of Jewish business to these rulers, made them an attractive source of money. A cautious king would use these resources moderately, but the combination of growing anti-Jewish hatred and the king's heavy financial needs often persuaded rulers like King Henry III to abandon this moderation. King

Henry III's departure from moderation was a blow from which the Jews of medieval England never recovered.

The accession of Edward I to the throne of England in 1272 initiated the last stage of Jewish life in medieval England. The most noticeable difference in Edward I's reign was his devotion to the goals and policies of the Church, including the ban on Jewish interest taking, increased segregation of Jews, and increased efforts to convert the Jews. In 1275, Edward I passed a law, similar to the policies of King Louis IX in France, demanding that Jews no longer occupy themselves with moneylending. The money lending business that had been a pillar of Jewish economic life and that had been supported by the kings of England was now outlawed by the monarchy.

The impact on the Jewish community in England was enormous. Some Jews tried to continue their business while hiding it from the law, others took their moneylending businesses to other lands, some tried to change to new occupations, and yet others turned to crime. It is remarkable that after 1275, we find repeated accusations of Jewish coin-clipping as well as the prosecution of suspected coin-clippers. Jewish business, which was in decline already, was dealt a massive blow. Of course, this also meant that the potential Jewish contribution to the royal treasury was now practically non-existent.

On July 18, 1290, the English King Edward I announced that all Jews must leave England by November 1 of that year. The curtains finally closed on an already ruined community. Edward's move was inspired by a need for income from his barons who wanted the Jews gone. Other factors in English society played a role as well. As mentioned before, with the vastness of the English records, historians have been able to study the Jewish community of medieval England in depth. Different views of what led to the expulsion have been expressed, but the consensus is that there were multiple factors that led to the expulsion. These include: the declining Jewish contribution to the English treasury, pressure from the Church for segregating and converting the Jews, increased royal support for these Church goals, and a high level of anti-Jewish hostility among the Christian population. When King Edward I found out that the population in the French counties of Anjou and Maine had been willing to pay for the expulsion of their Jews, he decided to make this anti-Jewish move that was highly popular.

In 1290, the Jews in England had a difficult choice between relocating or conversion. Some converted while most decided to relocate. The downfall of Judaism in England was the end of an

interesting episode in Jewish history. A new community had been created, thrived, and ended in little over two centuries. The English Jews that were exiled moved to France where they joined the already struggling communities there. Their expulsion inspired the French royalty toward a much bigger banishment, namely of all Jews from France, only sixteen years later. Forced to move further east into Germany, these English Jews merged with the larger community known as Ashkenazic Jews. Ashkenazic Jewry would continue to move further eastward into the less developed areas of northern Europe.