The Northampton Jewry and its Cemetery in the Thirteenth Century

By A. J. Collins


(The Hebrew text translated and annotated by Cyril Moss.)

The remarks which I offer on the Northampton Jewry and its cemetery in the thirteenth century, as they stand revealed in a Latin and Hebrew charter, must be in the nature of an interim report; for it is only a fortnight since the document became the property of the British Museum. We are indebted for it to Mr. Trelawney Dayrell-Reed, a good friend. He tells me that the charter was given to him in 1909 by the late Charles Scott Moncrieff, the translator of Proust, who, at a modest outlay of twopence, had retrieved it from a barrow in an Edinburgh street. “Sorting through things a few months ago,” adds Mr. Dayrell-Reed, “I came across it”. My aim this afternoon is to persuade you that this document, hitherto so lightly esteemed, is worthy of your serious consideration. In one respect my task should be easy. Using the word Starr in its widest sense, the late Herbert Loewe declared in 1932: “In the whole of England only 221 Starrs are known”. There had then come to light in the muniment-room of a Cambridge college “two tiny Starrs amounting in all to no more than 6½ lines of script”—these are Loewe’s words—and he hailed the find as an event of considerable literary importance.¹ Very many of the Starrs previously known resemble those

¹ The Eagle (magazine of St. John’s Coll., Cambridge), xlvi, No. 209, pp. 73-82. According to a note kindly supplied by the late Rev. Michael Adler, the Starrs known to-day, including the present document, Number 228.
two, not only in size, but in content also. All too frequently, they are, like them, records of money-lending transactions—acquittances for debt and so on—formal in expression, dashed off in the stress of business with little attention to the handwriting. My photograph will leave you in no doubt that the new document, in its eight long lines of Hebrew text (to say nothing of the Latin), is the work of a skilled and careful penman. As topics, there may be little to choose between graveyards and usury; but, whilst the usury of the Jews of medieval England is almost superfluously documented, deeds that treat of their graveyards must be few. I am aware of only one other, a sale of land in 1230 for the extension of the cemetery at York.2

If this new document has light to throw on the Jewry of Northampton, its appearance is timely; for that community has still to find a chronicler. In saying this, I do some injustice to the authors of the Victoria County History of Northampton. Largely from printed sources, they have attempted to trace the story, but only in the barest outline, and not without falling into error.3 They maintain, for example, that there was no Jewish settlement at Northampton in 1159; whereas, in fact, the Pipe Roll of that year records a payment of 15l. to the Exchequer “de Judeis de Norhanton”.4 The majority of the other ten Jewries mentioned paid larger sums, a sign perhaps that our community had not yet reached full stature. Some thirty-five years later, in the Northampton Donum of 1194, it appears before us at its zenith. Both in point of numbers and of contribution Northampton stands near the head of the list of the Jewries mulcted in that year to provide a ransom for Richard I.5 Thereafter it seems to have been one long tale of dwindling numbers and declining wealth. As early as 1215 houses in the town once owned by Jews had begun to pass by royal grant into the possession of Christians;6 the assessments of the Northampton community to the tallages of 1255 are

4 Pipe Roll Soc., i, p. 17.
6 Rot. Litt. Claus., i, p. 196. Other instances are quoted in V.C.H., Northants, iii, p. 27.
relatively light—several communities which had escaped with smaller contributions in 1194 are now more highly assessed; the survey of the real estate which the Northampton Jews perforce left behind them in 1290 shows that, in addition to the community, only five individuals held property in the town at the time of the Great Exile.

Somewhat unwillingly, I must remind you of one more fact. Until the reign of Henry II the London cemetery had been the only place of burial in all England for a Jew; in 1177, however, that King licensed his Jewish subjects to buy land in which to bury their dead outside the walls of any city. I mention this with reluctance because I shall make it clear later that the burial-ground with which my document deals cannot have been acquired before 1259. If a community in its decline thus provided for the last need of its members, we may be sure that the need had not been neglected during the period of expansion and prosperity. What, then, can I tell you of the resting-place of the many rich Northampton Jews who had subscribed, no doubt with wry faces, to redeem the pledge of their crusader-king? I confess that I am able to say nothing.

Additional Charter 71355, as the new deed will be known in future, is on vellum, ruled with a plummet, and measures $7\frac{3}{4}$ inches square. The Latin text, which comes first, conforms in phraseology to the general run of Christian legal instruments; the script is an example of the contemporary English charter hand at its best. The Hebrew version, although claimed by the Latin to be a literal translation of itself, in reality presents an entirely independent, a more

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9 *Gesta Regis Henrici Secundi Benedicti Abbatis* (Rolls Ser.), i, p. 182.

10 Dr. Cecil Roth, *Hist. of Jews in Engl.*, p. 13, has suggested that the Northampton community, like that of Lincoln, used the York cemetery. The distance from Northampton to York (about 150 miles, whereas London is only 60) rather militates against this theory; but it is fair to add that the new charter gives no hint of any previous burial-place at Northampton.
picturesque, and a somewhat more illuminating account of the events—the signatories shall have a word in a moment. From the tag or label at the foot, so says the Latin, once hung the common seal of the Jewry of Northampton.

Although this charter is not in the form of an indenture, the agreement which it records may well have been prepared in duplicate, since, without a counterpart, the Jews would have had no formal record of their contract. Be that as it may, if we have here the actual instrument handed by the Jews to their monastic landlords in Northampton, how came it to be consigned undocketed to the muniment-chest? There is, you will find, no endorsement to give a hint of the first or any subsequent owners.\(^\text{11}\) Not very long after the charter was executed, a chartulary or register of deeds was compiled for these same landlords, the Prior and Convent of St. Andrew, Northampton. This manuscript, the property of the British Museum,\(^\text{12}\) is not at present available for consultation, but when I examine it after the war, I shall be surprised if I find our document recorded in it; for my colleague, Dr. Flower, who has kindly examined a later copy of the chartulary (also owned by the Museum\(^\text{13}\)) has discovered no sign of it. It looks as if we shall be unable to trace the charter beyond the barrow of that Edinburgh hawker.

Whilst the seal committed the Jewry as a whole, only three of its number, doubtless the most substantial, are mentioned individually in the Latin portion and sign the Hebrew, namely, Samuel son of Aaron, the "capellanus" or "Hazzân", Benedict son of Isaac, who appears to have written the Hebrew portion, and Samson son of Samson. This Samson may possibly have met a violent end. On the Charter Roll, under the date 29th July, 1280, may be found the grant of a plot of land in Northampton "late of Sampson son of

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\(^{11}\) Two grants to the Priory of St. Andrew reproduced in Professor Stenton's *Facts of Early Charters*, Nos. xlvi., xlvii., both bear 13th-century endorsements. It is likely that they were once part of the muniments of the house, and one at least appears in the chartulary (see n. 12). The British Museum owns a number of deeds associated with the Priory, but they cannot be examined at present.

\(^{12}\) Royal MS. 11B. ix.

\(^{13}\) Cotton MS. Vesp. E. xvii.
Sampson, a Jew . . . which the king recovered against the said Jew by the judgement of his court as forfeited ".14 Almost exactly six months earlier, on 20th January, 1280, the sheriff and others had been authorized by Letters Patent "to sell the king's houses which have escheated to him in the said town by the forfeiture of Jews of the same who have been hanged ".15 If Samson's land was disposed of by virtue of that patent, what had been his offence? Along with other contemporary writers, a continuator of the chronicle of Florence of Worcester states that early in 1279 many Jews had been hanged for clipping the coin.16 Later in the same year (14th September, 1279) he records an alleged ritual murder at Northampton—it is the usual fantastic story of the crucified boy—adding that, in April 1280, many guilty Jews were dragged at the horse-tail through London to the gallows.17 In view of the dates, the clipping seems the more likely crime; but Samson may have forfeited his land for quite different reasons.

The purpose of the charter is to acknowledge the obligation of the community to pay an annual rent of half a mark to the Priory of St. Andrew, Northampton, for the burial-ground outside the north gate of the town. That, however, is by no means the entire story, which I will recount from the Latin version, with a reference or two to a translation of the Hebrew prepared by my friend Mr. Cyril Moss.

The Jews begin by reciting that they "had from Brother Guy, the Prior of St. Andrew of Northampton, and the Convent of the same place one charter sealed with their common seal making mention of forty pence yearly in which we were bound to them for our burial-place made by their licence in a certain piece of land outside the north gate of Northampton". Nothing is more certain than that this grant or perpetual lease of the cemetery was not obtained until after 24th January, 1259, on which day, as the Register

17 Ibid., p. 222.
of Richard Gravesend, Bishop of Lincoln, bears witness, Guy became Prior.\textsuperscript{18}

The next statement, “we lost the said charter in the disturbance of the realm of England which occurred in the time of King Henry the son of King John”, alludes to disorders at the time of the siege of Northampton during the Barons’ War in April 1264, when the Jews fled into the castle, there to await rescue by the King\textsuperscript{19}, leaving, ill-advisedly, as they were later to discover, some of their chattels in the care of Christians.\textsuperscript{20} In several towns the baronial party laid hands on the \textit{Archae} containing the Jewish bonds. Perhaps the Northampton chest suffered a like fate, a circumstance which might explain the “loss” of the original grant and be to some extent responsible for the complete absence of Northampton Starrs to-day. Taken without the Hebrew, the reference to Henry III as “King Henry the son of King John”, rather than as “our lord the King”, would suggest to any student of medieval Latin charters that Henry was no longer alive.\textsuperscript{21} Hear, however, what the Hebrew says: “Now we lost the aforementioned deed when our lord King Henry (long may he live) came against the city of Northampton, seized it and threw the city into confusion”. Obsequious as much misery may have made the Jews, they would not have gone the length of wishing a dead Henry long life; even if “long may he live” was an empty compliment, the words have at least served the unforeseen end of helping us to date this charter.

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Rotuli Ricardi Gravesend} (Canterbury and York Soc., vol. xxxi), p. 98.

\textsuperscript{19} After the victory of Simon de Montfort the Jews showed a not unnatural reluctance to return to their homes, and on 2nd June, 1264, two dozen burgesses of Northampton were appointed to protect them after they had quit the castle (\textit{Foedera}, Record ed., i, p. 441; \textit{Cal. Pat. Rolls}, 1258-66, p. 320).


\textsuperscript{21} To quote an example, a deed of exchange, dated Mond., after the Purification 27 Edw. III [4th Feb., 1353], in Madox, \textit{Formulare Anglicanum}, No. cclxxvii, begins: “\textit{Hac carta. . . Testatur, Quod cum Dominus Rex per Literas suas Patentes concesserit licenciam dederit mihi. . . .}” Cf. also \textit{ibid.}, Nos. xxxvii, cxxv. The Hebrew usage was different: see many examples in M. D. Davis, \textit{Shetaroth}, and Loewe, \textit{Starrs and Charters in the British Museum}, where the phrase “King Henry son of King John” or “King Edward son of King Henry”, always indicates that the first-named was living.
Because of this loss, "we have made," continued the Jews, "another agreement and charter with the aforesaid Prior and Convent by which we are bound to them in half a mark of silver yearly for the same burial-place and one adjacent house". In conclusion, they undertook to surrender the former grant, should it reappear, to their landlords, and to regard the new grant as "firm and stable for ever". "For ever" proved to be just twenty years. The inquisition taken after the Expulsion, recording the half-mark rental, also gives this last glimpse of the burial-ground: "The stones of the wall round the cemetery were worth 30s. for carting away".

Among the witnesses to the Latin version, all Christians, were John Spicer, then mayor of Northampton, and the two bailiffs, William de Blithesworth and Roger de Arderne. In the same capacities the three witnessed another charter belonging to the Museum, temporarily inaccessible, which, if we may believe the catalogues, gives Blithesworth's Christian name as Gilbert. According to Dr. J. C. Cox's Records of the Borough of Northampton, ii, pp. 549, 555, Spicer held the mayoralty in 1271 and 1273, Blithesworth (here, too, called Gilbert) and Arderne being the bailiffs of the former year. Seeing that other internal evidence limits the transaction to the period between the siege of Northampton in 1264 and the death of Henry III in 1272, we may, on the strength of these witnesses, assign the charter to the year 1271.

You will have noticed that the earlier grant, made between 1259 and 1264, reserved a rent of 40 pence, which became half a mark.

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22 Trs. Jew. Hist. Soc., ii, p. 98. Whilst this paper was passing through the press, Dr. Cecil Roth drew my attention to an entry in the Originalia Rolls at the Public Record Office (Rotulorum Originalium Abbreviatio, Record Comm., i, 1805, p. 76) which shows that the site was granted in 20 Edw. I [1291-2] to Ralph de Celenston, of Northampton, at an annual rental of one penny. It is described as "placea illa cum pertinentiis extra portam boralem Norht. que fuit sepultura Judeorum ejusdem ville cum edificiis ad placeam illam pertinentibus."

23 Add. Ch. 22347 (Index to Charters and Rolls in B.M., i, pp. 549-50). In the abbreviated forms of "Gilb" and "Gill." (or even "Will.") it is not difficult to confuse Gilbert with William.

24 In 4 Edw. I [1275-6] he appears on the Hundred Rolls as "Joh. le Spec quond. major Norht. (Rot. Hundred., ii, p. 15)."
under the new grant of 1271. Now half a mark represented 6s. 8d. or 80 pence: in other words, the rent had been doubled. True, the Jews had obtained that adjacent house, whatever its purpose may have been, not originally included. On that point the Hebrew is explicit, saying: “We made among ourselves another deed of half a mark rent for the house of graves aforesaid and for the house which we have taken in addition”. Nevertheless, a suspicion may cross your minds, as it has crossed mine, that a richly-endowed house of religion, which gave hospitality to saints and kings, had found profit in the misfortunes of its unbelieving neighbours.

LATIN TEXT

Sciant presentes & futuri quod cum nos Samuel Iudeus filius Aaron capellanus Samson filius Samsonis / Benedictus filius Ysaac & omnes alii Iudei Norh[am]t[one] habuissemus a fratre Wydone Priore sancti Andree de Norh[am]t[ona] / & eiusdem loci Conuentu vnam cartam sigillo ipsorum communi signatam facien-
tem mentionem de quadragin/ta denariis annuis in quibus eis tenebamur pro sepultura nostra de licencia ipsorum in quadam terra extra por/tam borealem Norh[am]t[one] facta. Nos in turbacione regni Anglie tempore Regis Henrici filii Regis Iohannis habita. / dictam cartam perdidimus & cum predictis Priore & Conuentu aliam convencionem & cartam fecimus per quam eisdem / tenemur in dimidia marca argenti annua pro eadem sepultura & vna domo adjuncta sicut in cartis inde / confectis plenus continetur vnde uolumus & concedimus pro nobis & heredibus & successoribus nostris quod si dicta / carta de quadraginta denariis predictis aliquando a nobis uel ab aliis inueniatur nullius sit valoris & eisdem redda/tur-cartae uero alia de dimidia marca annuatim a nobis & heredibus nostris eisdem soluenda pro dicta sepultura / & domo adjuncta rata & stabilis permaneat inperpetuum. In cuius rei testimonium hoc presens scriptum sigillo nostro com/muni duximus roborandum & littera hebraica transscribendum atque manibus trium Iudeorum superius nominatorum / signandum. Hiis testibus Iohanne Specario tunc Maiore Norh[am]t[one]. Willelmo de Blithes-
wortheman Roger de Arderne tune / ballius - Willelmo filio Michaelis - Iohanne filio Eustacii - Philippo filio Ricardi - Adam le Flemmeng - Adam de Billing - Willelmo / Spendeloue - Willelmo de Ouertone & aliis.

TRANSLATION

Let those present and to come know that, whereas we Samuel the Jew, son of Aaron, "capellanus", Samson the son of Samson, / Benedict the son of Isaac, and all the other Jews of Northampton had from Brother Guy, the Prior of St. Andrew of Northampton, / and the Convent of the same place one charter sealed with their common seal making mention of forty / pence yearly in which we were bound to them for our burial [-place] made by their licence in a certain piece of land outside the north / gate of Northampton, in the disturbance of the realm of England which occurred in the time of King Henry the son of King John / we lost the said charter, and we have made another agreement and charter with the aforesaid Prior and Convent by which / we are bound to them in half a mark of silver yearly for the same burial [-place] and one adjacent house, as is / more fully contained in the charters thereof made. Wherefore we will and grant for us and our heirs and successors that if the said / charter of forty pence aforesaid shall be found at any time by us or by others, it shall be of no effect and shall be restored to them; / but the other charter of half a mark yearly to be paid to them by us and our heirs for the said burial [-place] / and the adjacent house shall remain firm and stable for ever. In witness whereof we have caused this present writing to be confirmed by our common / seal and to be copied in the Hebrew script and to be signed by the hands of the three Jews above-named. These being witnesses: John Spicer, then Mayor of Northampton, William de Blitheworth, Roger de Arderne, then / Bailiffs, William son of Michael, John son of Eustace, Philip son of Richard, Adam le Flemmeng, Adam de Billing, William / Spendeloue, William de Ouertone and others.
We the undersigned acknowledge on our behalf and on behalf of the whole congregation of the Jews of Northampton that we have lost a deed which we had from the Prior of St. Andrews and the Convent of that place. This is to make it known that in the aforesaid deed the Prior and Convent aforesaid gave us permission to bury our dead whether of our own city or of other cities in a plot of ground which is outside the North gate of Northampton; and in return for that permission, we gave them 40 pence as rent per annum. Now we lost the aforementioned deed when our Lord King Henry (long may he live!) came against the city of Northampton, seized it and threw the city into confusion; so we lost the aforesaid deed. Wherefore we have made
THE NORTHAMPTON CHARTER
among ourselves another deed of half a mark rent for the cemetery [lit. “house of graves”] / aforementioned and for the house which we have taken in addition, as is written in the Latin document which the Prior and Convent aforesaid made for us. We acknowledge on our behalf and on behalf of the whole congregation of / the Jews of Northampton that the latter deed which speaks of half a mark rent shall be valid and binding among us, and the former deed which speaks of 40 pence rent / aforesaid which we lost, shall be null and void and shall be as a broken potsherd and shall be everywhere accounted as nought; and, if found, it shall be returned to the Prior and Convent aforesaid. And what / we have acknowledged on our behalf and on behalf of the whole congregation of the Jews of Northampton, we have signed for a proof, and for the sake of everyone who shall come after us in this city for ever. Samuel Ḥazzān, son of R. Aaron.

Benet son of Isaac. Samson son of the Ḥaber Samson.

THE SIGNATORIES

I. Samuel Ḥazzān, son of Aaron.

This name corresponds to “Samuel . . . Capellanus” in the Latin text.

H. P. Stokes (Studies in Anglo-Jewish History, p. 21) remarks that he has not yet met with a bilingual deed giving an equivalent in Hebrew to the title “Capellanus”. He queries the translation by Joseph Jacobs of “Isaac Capellanus Judeus” as “Isaac, Chazan or Cantor of the Congregation”, but has to admit that “a curious record in the Exchequer Rolls of the Jews for the year 1219 would suggest that the holder of some office was implied by the word “. The Northampton deed for the first time, so far as I can discover, makes it quite clear that Ḥazzān (sometimes rendered le Chanteur, the Precentor) is indeed the equivalent of Capellanus, thus supplying the evidence sought for by Stokes.

Dr. C. Roth (A History of the Jews in England, p. 118) calls this official the Sexton, and adds in note 3 (ad loc.): “The Capellanus

25 Courtesy title: see Loewe op. cit., i, p. 29.
or Chapelyn may perhaps be identical with the serviens Judaeorum (Excheq. of the Jews, i, 245). In other words, he was the Shammash (beadle). Our deed proves him to have been of much greater consequence than that.

I have not succeeded in finding his name among the records of pre-Expulsion Jewry. From this it would seem that he was no business man. Dr. A. Marmorstein informs me that Samuel is not known to him as one of the scholars of medieval Anglo-Jewry. Yet his signature stands first of the three, just as his name comes first in the Latin charter. He must then have been a person of considerable importance in his day.

II. Benet, son of Isaac (de Celariis or Celario).

Occurs as a party in Plea Rolls and other official records concerned with debts, 1272–6: Exch. of Jews, i, pp. 282, 303; ii, pp. 8 f., 31, 89; Cal. Close Rolls, 1268–72, p. 453 f.; ibid., 1272–9, p. 286.26

Cal. Patent Rolls, 1272-81, p. 463: Ratification by the Crown of the sale by the Sheriff of Northampton of a house "late of Benedict de Celario, which came into the King's hands by forfeiture" (1281).


III. Samson, son of Samson.

He must have been one of the leading Jews of the period, and the entries in the records relating to him are numerous. In the tallage receipts in Cambridge for 1219 (Stokes, op. cit., 251) mention is made of a Samson of Northampton, who is presumably the father of our Samson. The older man must have died ca. 1260. (See Cal.

26 That his father was Isaac de Celario is derived from the Close Roll entries in which Benedict is associated with two partners, Isaac, son of Isaac de Celariis (his brother), and Aaron, son of Samuel, all of Northampton. Exch. Jews, ii, p. 51 (1273) records a licence to the same three persons, styled Benedict, son of Isaac, Aaron, son of Samuel, and Isaac, son of Isaac—in neither case is the elder Isaac called 'de Celariis'—to be partners in a debt.
Pat. Rolls, 1258–66, p. 205 f. (1262); p. 525 (1265). Florida, the widow of Samson the elder, carried on business on her own account. (See Exch. of Jews, i, p. 264 (1270).)

The activities of Samson the younger are first recorded in 1241, when he was appointed by the King one of the six bailiffs of the Jews of Northampton, “in order that the tallage of 20,000 marks which the King has levied on the Jews might be collected” (Cal. Close Rolls, 1237–42, p. 353 f.) and his name does not disappear from the documents till 1280. In 1244–5 some forty-two prominent Jews of various cities, including Samson, acknowledge that a certain debtor owes nought to any Jew of the towns afore-mentioned except Benedict Crespin of London who claims two marks. (Exch. of Jews, i, pp. 107–8).

Suits arising out of debts due to him are recorded in Cal. Close Rolls, 1268–72, p. 370 (1271); Cal. Patent Rolls, 1266–72, p. 583 (1271), ibid., p. 650 (1272); Exch. of Jews, ii, p. 12 (1273); Cal. Close Rolls, 1272–9, p. 137 (1274); Exch. of Jews, ii, p. 181 (1274); Cal. Close Rolls, ibid., p. 150 (1275); Exch. of Jews, iii, pp. 11, 14, and 36 (1275); pp. 85, 143, and 225 (1276); Cal. Patent Rolls, 1272–81, p. 156 (1276). Three of these entries reveal the interesting fact that Samson was in partnership with no less a man than Master Elias, son of Master Mosseus, i.e. Rabbi Elijah Menahem of London, styled by Dr. Roth the most eminent English Jew of the thirteenth century. In 1273 he mainperned Jacob Copyn of Exeter (Exch. of Jews, ii, p. 13); in the same year he and Isaac of Bedford mainperned to have Belia of Bedford before the Justices (ibid., p. 16); and he and Salomon Buntyng, of London, mainperned Pictavin, son of Samson (ibid., p. 19. Pictavin was a younger brother of our signatory). In 1276 six Jews, tallaged at various places, are handed over to him and Isaac le Evesk’, both of London, as sureties (Exch. of Jews, iii, p. 133). In 1277 he, together with three other London Jews, mainperned Abraham, son of Ben’ (ibid., p. 312). From these last entries it is evident that, in 1276–7, Samson was living not in Northampton but in London. Indeed, as early as 1274 we find him described as a Jew of London. In that year inquest was made touching the chattels
of Sadekyn of Northampton, a Jew who had been excommunicated by the Masters of Jewish Law, and had persisted in his excommuni-
cation, whereby all his goods and chattels were forfeited to the King. Samson was one of the sixteen Jews who served on the jury, and is explicitly said to have been living in London (Exch. of Jews, ii, p. 174).

Finally, in Charter Rolls, 1257–1300, p. 231 (1280), we read: “Gift to Ralph de Selveston of a plot of land in Northampton, late of Sampson, son of Sampson, a Jew, which is worth by the year 2s., and which the King recovered against the said Jew by the judgement of his court as forfeited ”.