Starrs of Aaron of York in the Dean and Chapter Muniments of Durham

BY ELEAZAR BIRNBAUM

IN the Dean and Chapter Muniments of Durham there are five 13th century documents with Hebrew inscriptions which relate to the activities of Aaron of York. Aaron was born in the last quarter of the 12th century in York. His father, Jose, who was one of the leaders of the Jews of that city, perished with the rest of the community at York Castle in 1190. Aaron, at that time a child, managed somehow to escape. He later returned to the city where a new Jewish community was established and became its leading personage. In 1236 he was appointed to the highest position in English Jewry, that of Arch-Presbyter, secular head of the Jews in England. This office, which had been founded in 1199 and of which he was the third incumbent, he held until 1243. Aaron was a financier whose transactions were countrywide. His clients included many leading members of the nobility, the Church and the landed proprietors. In his official capacity he was responsible for raising from the Anglo-Jewish community vast sums demanded by King Henry III—frequently as irregular taxes or ‘gifts’. Besides this, he was in addition from time to time obliged to satisfy the rapacity of the king from his own private resources. These exactions left him a poor man when he died in 1268.

Our documents record some of his financial dealings. They include two bonds for a loan by Aaron to Thomas le Servant or Serjeant of Alvertor (now Northallerton in Yorkshire) on the security of his lands, and two quit-claims or releases, by which Aaron delivered the same property to the Prior and Convent of Durham. Thomas had evidently been unable to repay the loan and so his lands had passed to Aaron. They were acquired by the Prior of Durham who thereupon received the bonds given for them at the time of the original loan, as well as further documents by which Aaron officially and publicly renounced any claim to the property. As titles to the land they were naturally placed among the archives at Durham. Here they have now lain for over 700 years.

In style and content the deeds are typical of many of the period, as the references given in the notes below indicate.

The deeds, which in the 19th century were endorsed with Arabic numerals, fall into two groups:

1 They were kindly brought to my notice by Dr. D. W. Gooding, of the Department of Palaeography and Diplomatic, University of Durham. I should also like to thank other members of the University who kindly helped me in dealing with the non-Hebrew portions of the documents, and in particular Mr. M. G. Snape.

2 For a fuller biography of Aaron which sheds much light on the contemporary position of the Anglo-Jewish community, see M. Adler, ‘Aaron of York’, in Transactions J.H.S.E., vol. xiii (1936), pp. 113-155, where references are given to additional documents—preserved elsewhere—relating to Aaron’s business transactions. This article was reprinted in Adler’s Jews of Medieval England, London, 1939, pp. 127-173.

3 It is presumably this Jose (=Joseph) who is referred to in verse 17 of the elegy On the Martyrs of York, by R. Joseph of Chartres, republished with translation by C. Roth, ‘A Hebrew Elegy on the York Martyrs of 1190’ in Transactions, xvi (1952), pp. 213-20.

4 The Arch-Presbyter was a ‘civil servant’, appointed by the king, and not a religious leader or ‘Chief Rabbi’ as some have claimed; cf. Adler, Aaron, p. 123.
A. Four items classified 1.1. Ebor., no. 15. These are endorsed 1 (two documents documents which I have designated here ı[a] and ı[b]), 2 and 3. In all of these Aaron appears as a party.

B. One deed classified Misc. Charters, no. 4455, endorsed with this number. It bears Aaron's signature as a witness.

The Hebrew text of these documents has already been published three times¹: by J. T. Fowler in 1875², by M. D. Davis in 1888³ and by M. Adler in 1936.⁴ In each case, however, there are some incorrect readings. I am therefore giving new transcriptions of the Hebrew texts together with the translations, and some comments on the readings of my predecessors, as well as on other points of interest.

A. 1.1. Ebor., no. 15.

Endorsed: ı[a] (= Fowler, no. IV, p. 61, fig. 4; Davis, no. 198, pp. 362-363; Adler, Appendix III, A iii, p. 153).—An indented bond in Latin dated York, 17th June 1237, by which Thomas le Serjeant of Alverton acknowledges a debt of £6 to Aaron the Jew of York, pledging his lands as security. Hebrew endorsement in Aaron's handwriting:

עומש ירא公園 טמאפורה

'Thomas le Serjeunt/Serevant/Serjeant of Alverton.'

Notes.

(1) Fowler and Davis read the final word as מלאפרישי, mistaking the curved י for a second י. Adler omitted the י before the final י.

(2) שיריהוה : The letter י was often used in contemporary documents to represent a dy or dy sound in non-Hebrew words. The first י here is probably to be pronounced in this manner, the second as a vowel such as e. Cf. the spellings for Roger (Davis, no. 54 p. 141 and passim) and for Genta (Davis no. 12 p. 27).

Endorsed: ı[b] (= Fowler, no. V, p. 61, fig. 5; Davis, no. 199, p. 363; Adler, Appendix III, A iv).—An indented bond in Latin, apparently an

¹ Document no. 2 has actually been published four times, the first occasion being in 1872; see below p. [203] n. [3].
² J. T. Fowler, 'On certain “Starres” or Jewish documents, partly relating to Northallerton', in Yorkshire Archaeological and Topographical Journal, vol. III (1875), pp. 55-63. (With facsimiles and translations of the Hebrew texts of all the documents and transcriptions of the Latin texts of ı[a] and ı[b].) Fowler declares (p. 58) that his readings have been confirmed by 'Mr. Davies' (i.e. M. D. Davis, later the compiler of the work mentioned in note 3).

Davis’s versions were published in Shetaroth under the heading York deeds some 14 years after Fowler’s article. They bear the note 'Published and translated by Rev. J. T. Fowler, M.A.' but do not indicate where this was. They constitute a revision of Fowler’s text. Adler’s article refers to the work of both Fowler and Davis and states that the documents are in ‘Durham Cathedral Library’ (instead of ‘in the Dean and Chapter Muniments’), without giving classification marks.
MISC. CHARTERS, NO. 4455

THE HEBREW PORTIONS OF THE STARRS OF AARON OF YORK IN THE DEAN AND CHAPTER MUNIMENTS OF DURHAM

By courtesy of the Dean & Chapter
abbreviated version of $1$ $[a]$: the indenting does not seem to correspond. The parchment is largely decayed and very ragged at the edges. The last Hebrew word is mutilated and consequently very difficult to decipher. The Hebrew endorsement is in *mashait* (non-Square book-hand), not in the cursive used by Aaron on the other documents, and is in a different spelling. It reads:

{[ - ]$\text{נמס שריון דאבר רפואא

\text{שכטיראシェטירא}

\text{שכטיראシェטירא}}$


\text{Thomas Seryunt/Serevant/Serjeant of de Auvertona}

\text{vl [ - -]}

\text{and to (?) [- -]}

\text{villa/ville (?) [-]}

\text{'} (See note 5)

Notes.

(1) Fowler’s article gave the reading of the first letter as $\text{ב}$ instead of $\text{ב}$. — probably a misprint.

(2) Fowler read the first letter of the third word as $\text{ב}$ instead of $\text{ג}$. The $\text{ג}$ is an Aramaicism, quite commonly used in post-Biblical Hebrew; it is in addition often used at that period to represent the French de. In both cases its meaning is ‘of’. Examples in medieval documents are numerous; e.g. in *Misc. Charters no. 4455*, below, the two sons of Jose who made the deed both style themselves ‘de Kent’.

(3) Fowler and Davis read the third letter of the third word $\text{ג}$. Although the $\text{ג}$ of that period and in that style of writing was indeed rather narrow, it was a considerably broader and much taller letter than $\text{ג}$. Our letter, being shorter and narrower, is in fact a $\text{ג}$, representing a pronunciation of the $\text{al}$ in Alverton as the French au. (The Jewish community in England at the time was of French origin.)

(4) The use of $\text{ב}$ to represent $\text{ש}$ (in Auvertona) was quite common at this period although in other documents of this group $\text{ג}$ was used. The spelling with $\text{ב}$ was preferred in this document most probably to avoid the juxtaposition of three $\text{ש}$ in succession (אראורייטא), the first $\text{ג}$ being indispensible in conjunction with the $\text{ג}$ to express au. In other deeds of the period both spellings are used to represent the $\text{ש}$ sound; e.g. Stephen is spelt $\text{ cittijian (Davis, p. 110 line 7)}$ and $\text{cittijian (Davis, p. 120 line 10)}$. Occasionally $\text{ב}$ (overlined) is used to make it clear that a $\text{ש}$, and not a $\text{ב}$ is intended; e.g. $\text{cittijian (Davis, p. 77 lines 3, 11, 15, 17).}$ The final vowel in Auvertorn probably reflects an old form. In a late 11th century portion of the *Liber Vitae Ecclesiae Dunelmensis* (fol. 50b, facsimile edition, *Surtees Soc. no. 136*, London, 1923) the place is spelt Alvertuna.

(5) The last word is mutilated. Fowler and Davis described it as illegible although the first two letters are clear enough. There is a crack in the parchment after the $\text{ג}$ and some traces of ink,
and then the edge is broken off. Two readings seem possible:

(a) [וּמְהוּרָה] 'and to his heirs'. The responsibility of heirs or quit-claiming to them is quite commonly mentioned in such documents (cf. two quit-claims of Canterbury dated 1267 and 1270 in Davis, p. 335).

(b) -וּמְהוּרָה 'villa/ville'. The Latin texts of the documents endorsed 3 and 4 both refer to the Villa de Alu'ton. Another document signed by Aaron of York refers to John de Estuteville, spelt איזטווטויל (Adler, p. 154 line 5; Davis, p. 280).

The absence of a * is not an insuperable obstacle to such a reading in view of the erratic spelling of non-Hebrew words exhibited in these deeds.

(6) Adler gives no transcription of this document, describing it loosely as bearing 'the same endorsement' as the previous one.

Endorsed: 2

(=Fowler, no. II, pp. 59-60, fig. 2; Davis, no. 196, pp. 360-361; Adler, Appendix III, A).—An undated quit-claim in Latin to Hugh Derlyngton, Prior of Durham, of the lands formerly belonging to Thomas le Serjeant of Alverton. The Hebrew subscription, correctly given by Fowler, Davis and Adler, reads

מַשָּׁה מֵהָוָה שְׁכִּילָה מִמְשָׁבֵת בַּילְפָּס שְׁחָתָה עַמָּם אָבֶרֶן מַאוֹרֵרִים בּוֹ יָוָר

'I, the undersigned, certify that all that which is written above in Latin is true.—Aaron of York (Everwik) son of Jose.'

Notes.

(1) This deed and the next one (no. 3) are undated but must come from the period between 1258 and 1268 since Hugh Derlyngton’s first tenue of the office of Prior of Durham was from 1258 to 1272, and Aaron died in 1268.

(2) Among the witnesses enumerated in the Latin text are: ‘Adam le Cerf, then Mayor of York; Richard de Vescy, then Constable of York; Sir Gilbert, Rector of the Church of All Saints in Usegate; and Stephen Sperri, John le Espec., then Keepers of the Chest1 of the Lord the King at York; Peter Noel, Geoffrey de Stokton, John son of Henry the goldsmith, then Clerks of the Jews . . .’. It had been hoped that on the basis of the names of these office-holders the exact year when this deed was drawn up might have been ascertained. Unfortunately the records of those who held official positions in York are very incomplete for

1 Latin archa, the chirograph chest in which records of transactions between Jews and Christians were preserved. See C. Roth, A History of the Jews in England, Oxford, 1941, pp. 110ff. The 'Keepers of the Chest' were the two Christian chirographers who, together with two Jewish colleagues, administered the local archa, and not 'Keepers of the Archives' as translated by Fowler and Davis.
this early period. Extensive search of published contemporary sources has yielded very little to assist in the dating. According to a 19th century work, *A List of Civic Officials at York*, by R. H. Skaife, Adam le Cerf was Mayor in 1259 and possibly within the following years also: 1254-55, 1257-58, 1260-63, and 1265-67. This man and some of the other witnesses to this Deed are mentioned sporadically in other documents; but either they are not named in them as holders of office, or, in such cases as they are named as office holders, the documents concerned are undated. (3) Fowler states (p. 60) that ‘the Prior referred to is Hugh Derlyngton, who held the office from 1285 to 1289, which gives proximately the date of the documents’. Aaron was by then long dead. Fowler’s dates are those of Hugh Derlyngton’s second term as Prior.

(4) Davis (pp. 361 and 362) puts the date as early as 1237, taking it apparently as contemporary with Deed no. 1; but there is no justification for this.

(5) The use of Hebrew formulae in similar terms, by which Jewish parties or witnesses to a transaction, etc. attested in brief the details contained fully in the Latin text only of a document, was not uncommon in England in the 13th century. See, e.g., Davis, nos. 151-153, pp. 292-293.3

Endorsed: 3

(=Fowler, no. III, p. 61, fig. 3; Davis, no. 197, pp. 361-362; Adler, Appendix III, A ii, p. 152).—Quit-claim: an abbreviated Latin version of no. 2. The Hebrew text is the same, arranged thus:

אָרוֹן מַאוֹרִים וַיֵּרָא

‘I, the undersigned, certify that all that which is written above in Latin is true.—Aaron of York (Everwik) son of Jose.’

Note. Correctly read by Fowler, Davis and Adler, but wrongly dated 1237 by Davis.

B. Misc. Charters, no. 4455.

(=Fowler no. I, p. 58-59, fig. 1; Davis, no. 200, p. 364; Adler, Appendix IV, p. 155, fig. II on plate facing p. 150).—A quit-claim

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1 I am indebted for this information to Mr. Raymond Doherty, York City Librarian. Skaife’s work is unpublished.

2 I should like to thank Mr. R. B. Pugh, General Editor of the *Victoria History of the Counties of England*, for his helpfulness in my efforts to arrive at a more exact dating.

3 This deed, with Hebrew text and translation, was first published (alone of this collection) in *Feodarium Privatum Dunelmensis* [ed. W. Greenwell], (Publications of the Surtees Society, 58), Durham, 1872, pp. 204-5 (footnote). It contained the following mistakes:

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<tr>
<th>MS.</th>
<th>Greenwell’s Reading</th>
<th>Greenwell’s Translation</th>
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<tr>
<td>יא</td>
<td>אה</td>
<td>This</td>
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<tr>
<td>ע&quot;ש</td>
<td>ע&quot;ש</td>
<td>on the leaf</td>
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<tr>
<td>יִבְּשָׂ</td>
<td>יִבְּשָׂ</td>
<td>Yoki</td>
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</table>
in Latin of Deulecres son of Jose of Kent and [his brother] Jornin son of Jose of Kent to the Prior [Bertram de Middleton, 1244-58] and Convent of Durham of debts incurred to ‘the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul’; 29th June, 1250. Aaron of York’s signature as witness at the end of the Hebrew text.

‘We, the undersigned, make full acknowledgment that the Prior and the Convent of Durham are quit of debt from us and from our heirs and from all other freums from the creation of the world until [the Feast of] S[aaints] Peter and Paul in the 34th year of the coronation of our lord the King Henry son of the King John; and this we have signed/sealed in 4 lines and a half.—Deulecres son of Jose of/de Kent.—Jornin son of Jose of/de Kent.—Aaron, witness.’

Notes
(1) The ק proved a difficulty for Fowler, Davis and Adler. It is merely an abbreviation for קדש מרי or קדש מרים, meaning ‘holy’ or ‘saint’, and it appears in contemporary documents either in full (e.g. קדש מרים ‘Saint Nicholas’ in Davis, no. 23 p. 54; קדש מייקל ‘Michaelmas’, Davis, no. 29 p. 69) or as the suspension ק or ק (e.g. קדש יוסף ‘Saint Peter’, Davis, no. 33 p. 76; קדש יוסמש ‘Saint Mary’, Davis, no. 190 p. 352).
(2) Davis and Adler both read the ק as ר, a letter having the numerical value of seven. Davis therefore translated it ‘octave’ and Adler ‘the feast (seven days)’. They were misled by its similarity with the modern printed ק. The cursive forms of the two letters were in the 13th century quite different. This is clearly seen in the difference between our letter and the ר in the word קדש on the next line. That the correct reading is a ק is manifest since the letter is identical in form with the ק in the second קדש at the end of the fifth line.
(3) Saint Peter: the most usual Hebrew spelling of the saint’s name at the period seems to have been פירס Pierre (very frequent in Davis), and occasionally פירס (Davis, p. 96). As a personal name, however, the common spelling was פירס Piers. It is only

1 It is possible that the frequent use, in many of the documents published by Davis, of the ‘defective’ spelling without ר in reference to Christian saints in place of the normal plene spelling of the word פירס, may have been intentional, to differentiate it from Jewish use of the word and spelling פירס, which was generally reserved for Jewish martyrs, e.g. ‘Saint Martin’ and ‘Saint Joseph’ in single document, in Davis, no. 174 pp. 322-323.
thus that it is found in Davis (pp. 25, 51, 67, 127). The מיר is of our deed represents a variant of this form.

(4) Fowler made four errors in his transcription: he read the second 1 in יושב as a 9 (i.e. con(v)ent instead of convent); and the зыва as 1; and the letter 7 preceding קאנע after the name of each of the sons of Jose as ק. He also dated the document one year too early (p. 59: 1249 instead of 1250).

(5) To guard against forgery or unauthorised alterations the number of lines constituting the text and such features as the absence of alterations or similar details were often specifically mentioned (e.g. Davis, no. 144 p. 286)—hence the words 'this we have signed/sealed in 4 and a half lines'. The same practice is followed in Christian documents of the period.

(6) Many English Jews of the time had both 'secular' and 'religious' names. (Cf. C. Roth, History of the Jews in England, pp. 93-95.) Thus Deulecrs ('May God make him great' or 'increase him' or 'give him increase') often had as its shem qodesh counterpart Solomon or Gedaliah.

(7) To the right of the first line of the Hebrew text there are traces of several Hebrew words which have been erased, most likely at the time of writing. They are now browned, very probably as a result of treatment with gall by an earlier researcher, perhaps Fowler. They appear to be the same as the first five words of the Hebrew text, namely

(8) To the bottom of the document, on a parchment strip cut from the bottom of the document but not severed from it (technically 'sur simple queue'), is attached Aaron's seal in yellow wax, preceded by the words 'Hoc est sigillu[m] aaro[nis] in testi- moni[um]'. (The seal has not been 'lost' or 'disappeared' as Adler declares, p. 136 and note 200.)