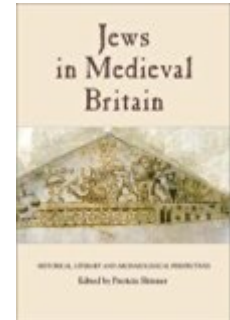


**Patricia Skinner, ed..** *Jews in Medieval Britain: Historical, Literary and Archaeological Perspectives*. Rochester: Boydell Press, 2003. x + 192 pp. \$75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-85115-931-7.



**Reviewed by** Frederic J. Krome

**Published on** H-Judaic (June, 2003)

In a 1987 historiographical essay Robert Stacey called for a re-conceptualization of Jewish experience in England between 1066 and 1290, arguing that "[w]e need, in short, to rethink the outlines of the history of medieval Anglo-Jewry, and to do that effectively, we must try to see that history as a whole." [1] The whole he referred to was the integration of English Jewish history, which by the late 1980s was attracting greater academic interest, with the larger study of medieval English history, a burgeoning field in its own right. Stacey hoped that a "one-volume" synthetic history of the Jews of Medieval England would also take into account English ties with the Norman Jewish community, by implication integrating the history of Anglo-Jewry with that of the continent.

Fifteen years later we still do not have that one-volume synthesis (although Stacey himself is writing one), yet the study of Anglo-Jewish history from the medieval through the modern era continues to grow and, perhaps more importantly, at least some of the integration Stacey sought has occurred. A decade after Stacey's original charge, therefore, seems an auspicious time to take stock

of the state of the field, which the essays in the volume attempt to do.

This collection is the result of a December 2000 conference held at the University of Southampton. In fact this is the second collection of essays to come out of that meeting, as the journal *Jewish Culture and History* published a special issue on the subject in 2001. Three of the contributors to that issue have generated new essays for this volume, while Barrie Dobson's article on York is a reprint. As with most collections of essays the results are uneven.

Part 1 of the collection--by Joe Hillaby, Robert C. Stacey, and Robin R. Mundill--provide readers with a narrative history of Anglo-Jewry from William the Conqueror through the expulsion of 1290. More than a mere narrative, however, these essays address an important question: why should historians, Jewish or otherwise, be concerned with the history of a Jewish community that at its height represented less than 1 percent of the English population? The answer reveals the truth of Archimedes' dictum that with the right lever and fulcrum you can move the world. De-

spite their size and its minority status the small Jewish community played an integral role in the development of the English state, through the development of forms of royal taxation, royal financing, and baronial and royal interaction. Indeed, every major constitutional document of the thirteenth century--such as the Magna Charta in 1215--had a Jewish dimension. Though each essay reflects the distinct writing style of its author, they are all well written, flow together chronologically, and reflect the latest research (much of it published by the authors themselves) in their notes.

Part 2 of the essay collection is divided into topical subjects. Paul Brand's "The Jewish Community of England in the Records of English Royal Government" examines the nature, variety, and extent of source material available to scholars from governmental records. Given the extremely truncated existence of the medieval Anglo-Jewish community, the periodic violence against their persons and property, and their status as royal serfs, governmental records provide the chief source of material available and Brand's essay provides an assessment of the material in an accessible manner.

More problematic is John Edwards's essay, "The Church and the Jews in Medieval England." Though Edwards is an expert on Jewish-Christian relations during the medieval era, his essay unfortunately does not reveal anything new, or even much that is distinctly Anglo-centric. Although Edwards seeks to integrate the English context into that of Europe as a whole, and does refer to some of the more recent research on the subject, we do not learn whether the English experience was distinct in any way. Even the development of the ritual murder accusation in the twelfth century, which may have been England's major contribution to Jewish-Christian relations, is given short shrift. The essay is probably the most disappointing in the collection.

For both the historian and the general reader who is not as well versed in the archaeological history of Anglo-Jewry, and how to integrate such material into historical research in general, David Hinton's essay, "Medieval Anglo-Jewry: The Archaeological Evidence," is a joy to read. Hinton not only analyzes the major research on the subject, much of it buried in local archaeological journals or publications, he then skillfully introduces the reader to assessing its importance. For example, the remnants of the York and Winchester Jewish cemeteries provoke intriguing questions as to the ritual practices of the Anglo-Jewish community. In York the orientation of the cemetery along a north-south axis instead of east-west, and the fact that a number of coffins contain metal fittings, raise the question as to how much Jewish ritual practices can be assumed to have conformed across medieval Europe. It also requires the historian to consider how much Jewish ritual had to adapt (by choice or force) to local conditions. (pp. 102-103)

More than sixty years ago Michael Adler was among the first to include information on Jewish women in his articles. Adler's scholarship on medieval Anglo-Jewry epitomized the admixture of filiopietism, amateurism, and devotion to primary-source research found in the publications of the Jewish Historical Society of England during the first half century of its existence.[2] Since that time the field of women's history has expanded considerably, and Suzanne Bartlett's essay, "Women in the Medieval Anglo-Jewish Community," reflects most of these developments. Interestingly, the extensive nature of the tallage rolls enables scholars to develop a much more sophisticated picture of gender roles, especially in the economic sphere, than is sometimes possible for the English gentile population. Bartlett rightly emphasizes the difficulty in determining how practice may have differed from recorded law and custom (p. 126). To investigate this question scholars need to go beyond the more easily discovered, and already printed, exchequer documents, and locate rare

documents, such as betrothal agreements, that can sometimes be found in repositories outside the Public Record Office. In addition, it must also be remembered that some of the already printed documents are not in fact complete. Previous editors sometimes left off material, such as account information, that was not considered significant at the time. Would scholars be well served to re-investigate the originals of some already published documents? Probably, as enticing as the published material can be, and much of it is of high quality,[3] historians seeking to investigate new avenues, or re-investigating old subjects by asking new questions, should indeed consider re-investigating the originals.

Anthony Bale's "Fictions of Judaism in England before 1290" is the final original contribution to this collection. Basing his analysis on cultural theory methodology, Bale's analysis is refreshingly free of jargon. Surveying the image of the Jews in England prior to their expulsion Bale investigates not only English Judeophobia, and it is here that the reader will learn the most about the development of the ritual murder accusation, but he also considers the potential for Philosemitism in an age not necessarily known for a sympathetic view of the Jews. Although he concludes that it was unlikely to have existed in literature, it may indeed, have been found in the real world.

Finally, Barrie Dobson's reconsideration of the York Jewish community, which as was stated earlier is a reprint from the other collection of essays to come out of the Southampton conference, rounds off this generally fine collection of essays with a case study of a community. Dobson, whose work on the York Jewry in the 1970s revolutionized our understanding of the sources and issues, revisits his old haunts and finds that many of his conclusions have stood the test of time. Given the high quality of Dobson's work this should surprise few readers.

Taken as a whole these essays do not revolutionize our understanding of medieval Anglo-Jew-

ish history. That is not their goal. They achieve their goal of delineating the current state of knowledge about the field. It is hoped that this material will be considered not just by Jewish historians, who can integrate the Anglo-Jewish experience into the wider European content, but by English historians, who often lack a sense of the place of the Jews in the wider narrative of medieval English history.

#### Notes

[1]. Robert Stacey, "Recent Work on Medieval English Jewish History," *Jewish History* 2, no. 2 (Fall 1987).

[2]. Michael Adler's essays, most of which were originally published in *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England*, were republished in *The Jews of Medieval England* (London: The Jewish Historical Society of England, 1939).

[3]. See, for example, Zefira Entin Rokah, *Medieval English Jews and Royal officials: Entries of Jewish Interest in the English Memoranda Rolls* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2000).

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**Citation:** Frederic J. Krome. Review of Skinner, Patricia, ed. *Jews in Medieval Britain: Historical, Literary and Archaeological Perspectives*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. June, 2003.

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