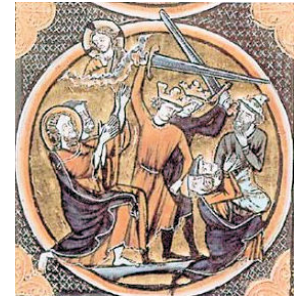


The Jews of England 1066 to 1290

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Part 9 – Exile



Crusader Knights Killing Jews

Edward was in constant need of revenue. Before his accession, he had embarked on Crusades and fought wars abroad. As King, he battled against the Scots and the Welsh, undertaking ambitious and expensive projects; magnificent castles such as Caernarfon and Harlech. His building works include the twelve crosses in memory of his wife Eleanor of Castile (d1290) from which Charing Cross derives its name. He borrowed heavily, mostly from Italians. Edward's Statutes of the Jewry (1275) followed the Council of Lyons 1274 decree that no Christian country should tolerate alien usurers. He continued to drain the wealth of England's Jewish communities through tallages backed up with the threat of deportation or banishment.

It is clear that the Jewish communities struggled to meet the payments, even though in some years they were much reduced, indicating that even Edward knew from his examination of the Archae records that Jewish resources were severely diminished. Nonetheless, tallages were imposed in 1274, 1275, 1277 and 1278. From one imposition to the next, the Jews were constantly in arrears. The next and final tallage was in 1287 for £13,333 6s 8d. Asher of Winchester records that on Friday 2nd May 1287, "all the Jews of the land were imprisoned" as only just over £3,900 had been received. Beyond outstanding bonds, there was little more Jewish money to be had. Jews started selling what property they could, though Edward's "Articles Touching the Jewry" even restricted what they might buy or sell. In 1288 a non-Jew was charged with trespass and fined for trading with Jews.

In 1289, Edward fell into heavy debt while trying to retain control of his properties in France. In 1287 he had expelled his Jews from Gascony, appropriating all their property and debts. The Gascon economy had survived. Now he made his move in England. On 18 June 1290, Edward sealed the Archae taking control of all Jewish bonds. On 18th July 1290, which was Tisha b'Av, he legislated expulsion. England's Jews had just 105 days to make their way to ports and leave.

Though the Jews had originally lived all over, their settlement had been restricted to towns with Archae under Richard I. They had been expelled from Bury St Edmunds in 1190, Leicester in 1231, Newcastle in 1234, Derby in 1261 Bridgnorth in 1274 and the estates of Eleanor of Provence in 1275. Emigration was scarcely an option. As the king's effective chattels they had no right to leave, no expectation of taking their property and nowhere much better to go. One exception, Aaron fil

Vyves, had a unique status. Aaron had been given to Edward's brother Edmund of Lancaster by their father Henry III, and was known as "Edmund's Jew". Aaron was able to sell his property in London and Oxford and leave for Europe in August. His outstanding debtors paid Edmund 40 marks to be free of all their debts, lest the exile be reversed and Aaron return.

Although one later account would claim that 15,000 desperate Jews drowned crossing the channel into exile, there were probably little more than 2000 Jews left in England by November 1290.

Edward seized their assets and gifted 113 properties to his favourites. He cancelled about £20,000 in bonds, not nearly enough to cover his debts. Despite instructions that they should be given safe conduct in order to cross the sea, the impoverished Jews experienced attacks and looting. In some cases, their assailants were tried and hanged. Amongst the cargo recorded as stolen from the fleeing Jews were 288 barrels of herring.

In England for 224 years, the Jews had briefly flourished. They had contributed to its wealth and some had shared in it. Jews had enjoyed scholarship and been regarded for their wisdom. With exile, their synagogues and cemeteries were destroyed. A wealth of history is recorded in the financial rolls, in the marginalia of mediaeval manuscripts and caricatures painted on the inside of cathedrals.

Tragically, unlike the later expulsions from Spain and Portugal, no self-identifying community of "Anglo Jewry in exile" emerged. Why did England's Jews vanish without a trace? It is possible that the numbers were so few. It is also possible that it would be their destiny and their children's destinies to have lost their identity amongst the other Jewish communities who suffered banishment and expulsion in the generations which followed.