

JEWISH SEAL FOUND AT WOODBRIDGE.¹

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Its connection with the subject of Mr. Davis' very interesting memoir "The mediæval Jews of Lincoln," lately published in this Journal (xxxviii, p. 178), may be thought to give some importance to the little memorial of that people, now brought under the notice of the Institute: and which besides, claims attention of itself as the most elaborate specimen of the kind that has ever yet offered itself to my examination. It is a circular seal of brass, $1\frac{1}{4}$ inch in diameter; device, a Wyvern *regardant*, looking at a star: the legend in the lettering of the twelfth or thirteenth century, somewhat defaced in parts, seems to read

+ S NATHITEDERICIALE—HDRIIVD,

which may be translated as "Seal of Nathan, son of F(r)ederic, son of Alexander, the Jew."

The planet Saturn is regularly typified in Roman Astrology by a *serpent*, in allusion to his serpent-drawn car, and in that form takes his place amongst the emblems of the other days of the week as seen upon that frequent antique amulet against the Evil Eye—and the *serpent* of the ancient was naturally converted into the mediæval *dragon*. The device, therefore, may either astrologically represent the *horoscope* of the individual; or it may refer to his *nationality*, inasmuch as the planet Saturn is the guardian of the Jewish race: the Sabbath itself being merely the *dies Saturni*; and their long-expected Messiah is to make his appearance when that star is in the Sign Pisces. The mediæval Jews were the world's astrologers, and were most careful in keeping record of their nativities;

¹ Read at the Monthly Meeting of the Institute, February 7th, 1884.

as a curious proof of which care, the celebrated Kimchi has gone out of his way to insert the horoscopes of his successive children in his Commentary on the Psalms.

The *legend* of the seal offers some points worthy of attention. The owner registers himself in the names of his father and grandfather: and my learned friend, Rabbi Schiller-Szinessy informs me that a Jew is not allowed to designate himself by more than *three* descents, however far back he may be able to trace his genealogy. In the second name, the omission of the R, seemingly a reminiscence of "Federigo," argues an *Italian* origin for our Suffolk Nathan. As Hebrews, even in the present day, are fond of disguising their scriptural appellations under christian equivalents of the same sense as "Alfred" (*Alle Friede*) for "Solomon," it is possible that the mediæval "Solomon" might have gone about his business with less molestation from the Gentiles, and continue to enjoy the lucky omen of his name, in the form of the "Teutonic Friede-Reich," equally signifying "Rich in Peace." From Macedonian times, "Alexander" has been admitted into the list of "Holy Names" that may lawfully be borne by a Jew, according to tradition, in virtue of the favour shown by the great conqueror to the High Priest, Onias; but more probably, on account of the encouragement given by the enlightened Ptolemies to the race of traders attracted to their dominions. It was a Tiberius Alexander, the "Ægyptius atque Alabarches" of the indignant Juvenal, who acted the part of a Rothschild to the hard-pressed Vespasian on his taking possession of the utterly exhausted empire. The circumstance of our Nathan's boldly proclaiming his nationality by the addition "Judæus," is important, as pointing to a period of our history when "the Chosen People" enjoyed as much consideration and real influence in the community as at the present day. Nay, taking into account the now almost inconceivable *impecuniosity* of Norman times, the Jewish money lender, with his sackful of ill-favoured silver pennies (for *gold* coin even he had never seen, save perchance a stray bezant or Arab dinar, mounted as a priceless jewel) was really a mightier man amongst the penniless borrowers than his modern representative, the millionaire, rich only in invisible bonds and paper wealth,

that vanish like smoke with a fall of the market. And again, as the *magnitude* of the seal, according to the rule of the age, bore a defined relation to the *status* of the sealer; according to this criterion, "Nathan, Ben Federigo, Ben Alexander" must have been a merchant of note in his day (like his possible contemporary, Isaac of York) to be entitled to a seal of the dimensions of the present specimen. And to conclude: the apparent anomaly of the *Cross* prefixed to the signature of a *Jew* may be got over by supposing that from its perpetual use in such a position, the symbol had lost all *religious* meaning when so placed, and was come to be considered as merely the mark of commencement.

This seal is said to have been picked up at Woodbridge, Suffolk, and accidentally came into my possession in the course of the present autumn.