Jewish-Christian Relations in Medieval London: An Archaeological Evaluation

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Tracing the Jewish presence in Medieval England is a challenge. As David Hinton, in his article 'Medieval Anglo-Jewry' says, identifying the presence of a minority group in England, assessing whether its material culture can be recognized and trying to understand its effects on the general population are complex tasks.[1] The result is that thus far, the study of the Medieval Jewish community in London and in fact, all over England, has concentrated on surviving historical documents. Unfortunately, our documentary picture is far from complete. As Patricia Skinner notes in her work on Medieval Jews in Britain, the massacres suffered by the Anglo-Jewish community led to manuscripts being looted and sold to Jewish communities abroad. The community is therefore studied through the fiscal records, which 'cannot satisfactorily answer questions about everyday life for the Jewish residents and their neighbours. Our view is very limited, confined to the wealthiest and those active in dealing.'[2]

It would be inaccurate to say that we have no additional data on the lives of the Jewish community in London, however. Some archaeological data has survived and when pieced together and supported by historical records, can help us create a somewhat fuller picture on the everyday life of the Jewish community in London and their relationship with their Christian neighbours. The Jews of London arrived with William I in 1066 and were expelled in 1290 by Edward I. This provides us with a clear residential window of 220 years, which makes the accurate dating of associated material culture very important to the identification of the community. Historical records indicate that Jews and Christians lived together in a mixed neighbourhood known as

'the Jewry' in London. Please see Figure 1 for excavated Jewish sites considered.

This paper will argue that medieval Anglo-Jews formed a distinct community with some lifeways that were distinct from their Christian fellows: different burial customs and hygiene customs. Yet there are also many indications of interaction with the wider English community. Jews lived alongside Christians in the largely the same houses, using the same tools and objects, making them quite hard to distinguish one from the other. This indicates the two communities were not isolated and hostile to one another and shows some degree of peaceful coexistence, until the worsening conditions in the thirteenth century and the expulsion.

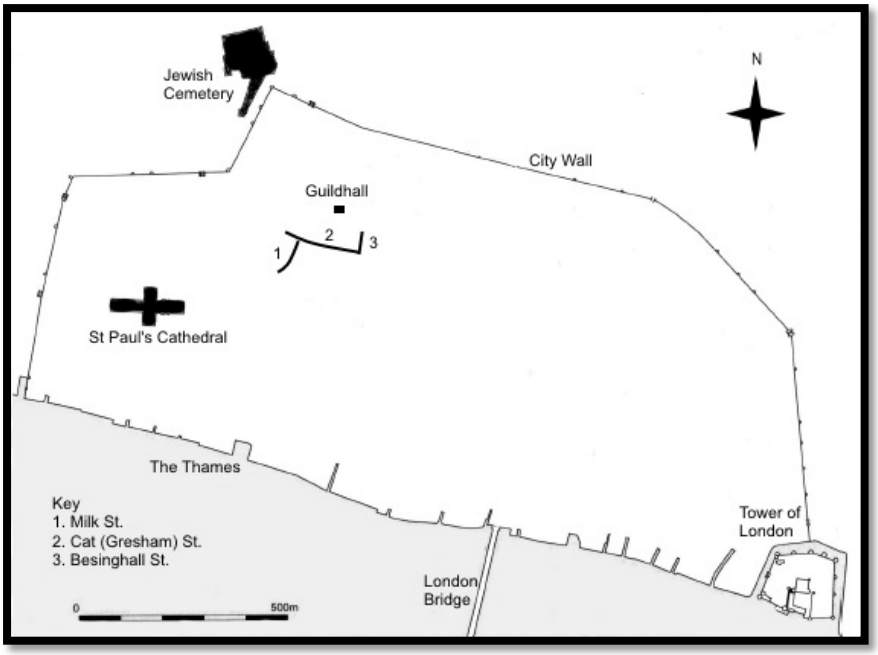

Figure 1: The city of London (c. 1270) showing the city walls and location of excavated Jewish sites; after Blair et al. 'Two medieval Jewish Ritual Baths – Mikva'ot – Found at Gresham Street and Milk Street in London', fig. 1.

Spatial Analysis

This discussion is not intended to be a site catalogue for medieval sites in London. I have chosen to concentrate on sites that contain clear Jewish presence, as indicated by material culture and documentary evidence to provide the most reliable information about the Jewish community in London in order to discuss Jewish Christian coexistence.[3]

1-6 Milk Street (MLK 76, GHT 00 - Site 1 in Figure 1)

There were two churches on Milk street: St Mary Magdalen, established by *c.* 1111-35 and All Hallows Honey Lane, established by 1191-1212. Property ownership records in the street indicate a mixed ownership, as can be seen in Figure 2. The churches and cemetery were under Christian ownership and are shaded in grey. Records show that Tenement 1 was also owned and used by various Christians in the 12th and 13th centuries.[4]

Tenement 2 belonged to Master Moses, Jew of London before 1076. After his death, the property was claimed by his son, Cresseus, Jew of London. After 1076, the property had passed to the crown, but Cresseus was compensated for loss of the property to Knight Stephan Chendut. The knight then sold the property to Cresseus, son of Master Elias, Jew of London after a few months.[5] Since the property was in the hands of Jews for the vast majority of the period, it is shown in the plan in white, denoting Jewish ownership.

Tenements 3 and 4 show a mixed ownership of both Jews and Christians during this period. In the plan, they are white with black dots. In 1215 Tenement 3 was in possession of John of Enefeld, Knight. By 1276 however, it belonged to Bonamicus, Jew of York.[6] Records from the early 13th century show that the property was owned by Martin the Virly, then Bernerius of Rouen, then Leo the Jew (Leo le Bland, the Jew). There was some attempt to seize the property and give it away, but Leo continued to hold it and passed it on to Joyceus, Diaya, Isaac and Samuel, sons of Abraham, Jew of London. After the death of Isaac, the king received Isaac's quarter and bought the rest of the three quarters of the property, to give it to his crossbowman Martin Seneche. Thereafter, the property belonged to Christians.[7]

Property ownership records, however, are not evidence for actual residence. Further support to the residence of Jews on Milk Street is provided by archaeological evidence. Clearly associated with Tenement 5 is a *mikveh* (ritual bath).[8] Taylor's research confirms that the property was held by Moses Crespin, of a family of leading London Jewish financiers.[9] This provides very strong evidence that Tenement 5 was not only owned by Jews but also had Jewish residents.

Two *mikva'ot* have been identified in London to date. The Milk Street *mikveh* is the more substantial of the two. It was built with high quality stone, aligned north-south and consisted of seven steps leading down to an apsidal-ended chamber. It measured 3.00 by 1.20m and its maximum internal depth was 1.45m. Later, an east-west internal blocking wall was added, but it is unclear whether this was a deliberate modification or the foundation of a later building, constructed over the *mikveh* following the expulsion of 1290.[10]

Immersion in water for purification was practiced in Judaism as early as Biblical times and the earliest constructed *mikva'ot* are known from the second half of the second-century BC. The *mikve* continued to be an important part of Jewish life in Medieval London. Its location in a Jewish household (the Gresham street *mikve* was also found in a Jewish household) has been a cause of some speculation, since it is assumed that *miqva'ot* are usually public structures associated with synagogues. In fact, these two Medieval London examples are not uncommon. In my catalogue of archaeological sites in Byzantine Palestina, a wide variety of structures identified as *mikva'ot* were found in a variety of locations including under synagogues, under private houses or as independent structures both inside and outside settlements. It is therefore unsurprising that two *mikva'ot* were found in Jewish houses, as there is no requirement for them to be associated with synagogues, nor are there always found within a synagogue compound. This strengthens Blair's conclusion that these *mikva'ot* do not necessarily indicates the existence of private synagogues.[11]

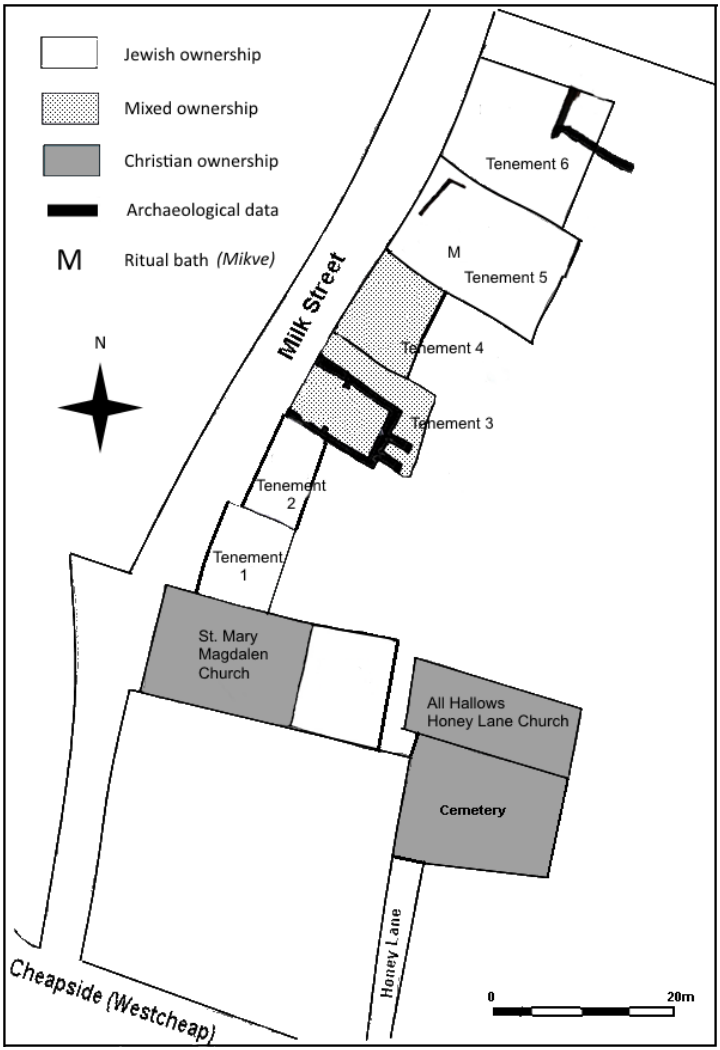

Figure 2: Milk St Plan showing historical and excavation data after figures 35, 37 and 46 in Scofield at al, 'Medieval buildings and property development in Cheapside', *Transactions of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society*, 41, (1990) 39–238.

Dayson, in his analysis of the documentary evidence associated with the Blossom's Inn Site notes the existence of a synagogue (*scola Iudeorum*), its former existence recorded in the first half of the 14th century on Gresham Street, in the vicinity of House 6 on Milk St.[12] It must be noted, however, that this synagogue is not associated with any archaeological evidence at present. Nevertheless, evidence for a church, a synagogue and a ritual bath presence on the same street provides us with a very strong case for multiculturalism and coexistence in this part of London.

81-7 Gresham Street (GDH85, Sites 2 and 3 in Figure 1)

In close proximity to Milk St, three structures, one including a *mikveh* and a church were excavated in Gresham Street, formerly known as Cat Street. The houses were excavated in 1986. The house with associated *mikveh* is at the corner of Gresham St and a lane leading north towards Guildhall (Tenement 8 in Figure 4). The house comprised several wall foundations surrounding a feature interpreted as a Jewish ritual bath. The feature is a rectangular arrangement of two courses of stone blocks. Its original depth and the height of the associated floors is unknown. The internal dimensions are 1.64 by 1.15m, and 56cm in depth. Pottery dates the construction of the *mikveh* to the 12th century and its disuse to the 13th century.[13] As in Milk St, documentary evidence indicates Jewish ownership of the building. A charter of 1280 names the owner of the house as Aaron son of Vives. So, we have both archaeological and documentary evidence for the ownership and residency of Jews in this house.[14]

The Churchyard of St Lawrence Jewry (see figure 4), next to Tenement 8, was established in the third quarter of the 11th century and documentary evidence on its continued existence and function exist up to the 13th century.[15] Tenements 9 and 10 have no clear archaeological evidence indicating Jewish ownership. They are dated archaeologically to the same date as Tenement 8. Documentary evidence indicates that Tenements 9, 10 and 11 had Jewish owners in the second half of the 13th century.[16]

Aaron son of Vives was a prominent and important member of the Jewish community, as apart from owning the house with the *mikveh*

(Tenement 8) he is also recorded as the founder of a synagogue on the south side of Gresham Street, opposite the church of St. Lawrence, on Basinghall Street (site 3 in Figure 1). Figure 4 shows the position indicated by documentary evidence (synagogue?) as well as some archaeological evidence for the structure of the synagogue from the 12th century, despite the documentary evidence being from the thirteenth century. In 1256 Henry III gave to John son of Jeoffrey the chapel of St Mary-in-the-Jewry 'where there had once been a Jewish synagogue'.[17] Archaeological evidence in support of the identification of this structure as a synagogue comes in the shape of two twelfth-century stone buildings and an architectural fragment, which could be a voussoir from a relieving arch (see Figure 3). This provides the possibility of formal religious architecture that may well have been a synagogue.[18]

Figure 3: Possibly a voussoir from a relieving arch used by archaeologists to identify a synagogue. By permission Museum of London.

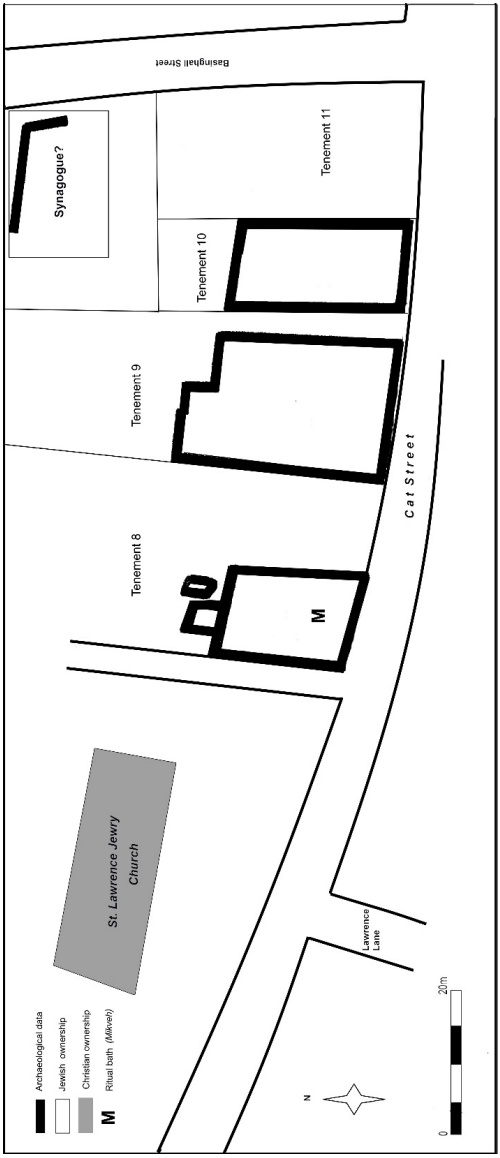

Figure 4: Gresham (Cat) and Basinghall Street Plan Showing Historical and Excavation Data after Bowsher D et al. The London Guildhall MOLAS Monograph 36, figs. 70 and 315

The documentary and archaeological data provides us with a picture of Jewish-Christian co-existence in Gresham Street. On the same block we have identified a Christian church surrounded by burials, Jewish households with one *mikveh* and a potential synagogue all in close proximity. This provides compelling evidence for religious tolerance in Medieval London, at least in the twelfth century.

Jewin Crescent/Jews' Garden (WFG58/59) – burial ground

The Jewish Cemetery of London was outside the city wall, near the Milk Street and Gresham Street sites. It was located by the north-west angle of the city wall, near Cripplegate (Figure 4). It has had various names over the years but a significant term used in 1291 and 1249-95 is '*Leyrestowe*', which means "a laying or burial place with religious significance, i.e. consecrated".[19] This indicates that at least in the early and middle twelfth century, the Jewish cemetery was considered to be sacred not just by the Jewish inhabitants but also by their Christian neighbours.

A documentary survey by Marjorie Honeybourne indicates that at least one Christian land owner was willing to rent out a part of his land to the Jewish Cemetery. At first, the cemetery was surrounded by Christian-owned houses, which were sold over time to members of the Jewish community to enlarge the cemetery. Some small evidence of legal challenges by Christians against Jews on the matter of the land also survives, yet this appears to be the exception, rather than the rule.[20]

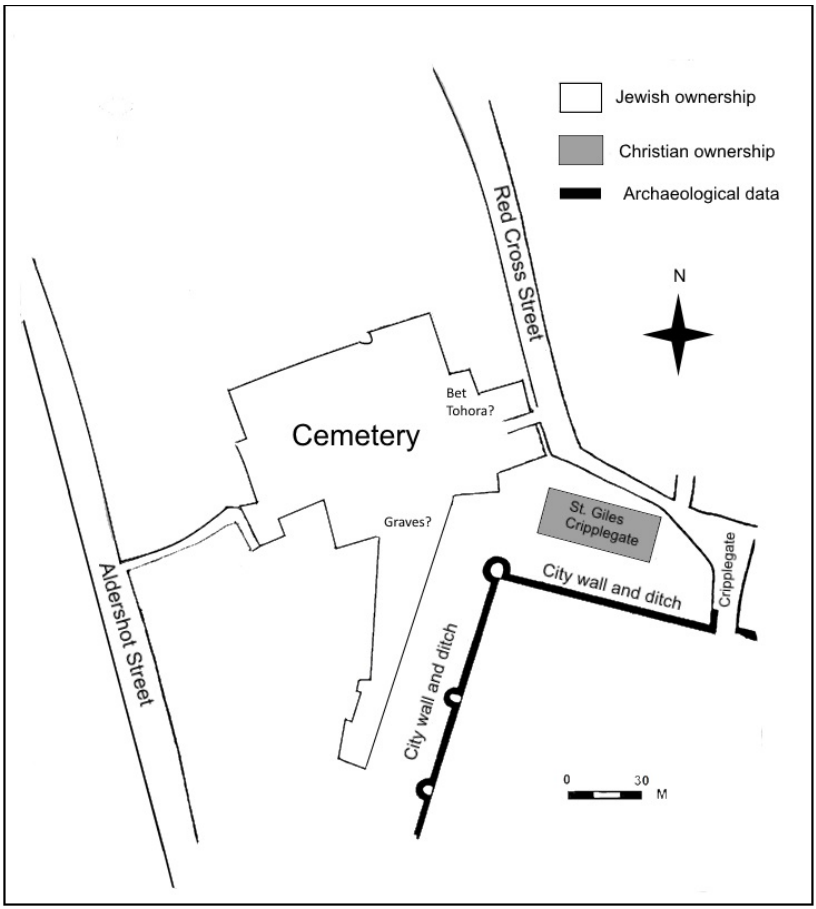

Figure 5: The Jewish Cemetery at Cripplegate and Surrounding Area Showing Historical and Excavation Data after Honeybourne M B, 'The Pre-Expulsion Cemetery of the Jews in London', in *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society*, 20 (1959-61), p. 147 (plate 25).

The Jewish Cemetery will be further discussed below in an effort to differentiate between Jewish and Christian Burial customs in London. For the purposes of this analysis however, its location on previous Christian land, its mostly untroubled usage, and the references to it as a sacred place in everyday Christian parlance indicates further

evidence of mixed Jewish and Christian residence, life and indeed death in this area of London.

Since residency indicates coexistence and religious tolerance, the way Jews and Christians lived should be examined next to see if there are significant barriers between the two communities. Objects used every day reveal a great deal about the people who use them and cultural similarities and differences can be revealed by design and decorative elements.

Portable Objects

The difficulties facing us when trying to trace Jewish material culture are never greater then when attempting to find their portable objects. Hebrew texts can be found on tally sticks and seals, as well as the occasional larger object, such as the Bodleian Bowl,[21] yet few of these objects were found *in situ* and none in London. No clear Jewish symbols, such as a *menorah*, have yet been found in medieval London. This could be due to the short and transient nature of Jewish settlement and possibly removal by the owners themselves when they were exiled or the result of destruction or sale to Jewish communities outside of England.

To overcome this data shortage, Gabriel Pepper attempted to construct Jewish indicators from assemblages of everyday medieval objects such as counters, scales and lead tokens.[22] Since clear religious indicators are not archaeologically recoverable, Pepper tried to trace Jewish money lending and trade activities instead. There are considerable shortcomings in Pepper's dependence on these assemblages as indicators of Jewish presence. Hinton, the foremost authority on medieval England, said that these artefacts are far too commonly found to be a reliable indicator of Jewish presence.[23] Three of his five types of chosen artefact refer to money lending or mercantile activity, are not always closely datable to the period of Jewish occupancy and are not specifically part of Jewish culture.[24] Yet the results of Pepper's statistical analysis are interesting. All the lead tokens, 73% of the scales and 58% of the counters come from four sites, which include the sites discussed in this paper.[25] These numbers are statistically significant and while they do not help us identify Jewish presence, they

provide some information about both Jews and their Christian neighbours in this part of London. Trade and banking activities are clearly attested by these objects and confirm historical claims of Jewish professions. Of course, it is entirely possible that not only merchants and bankers lived in this part of London. This data provides us with no information about other residents and their employment.

Another attempt to relate portable objects to London Jews was undertaken by Nigel Jeffries. He noted that large to very large pottery groups, containing well preserved sherds, many of them joining and with reconstructable profiles, were found around Gresham St. The shards are tightly dated to 1270/90-1300 and were found in cellars or pits which Jeffries sees as an indication of a hastily discarded and discrete assemblage. He proposes this is the result of the changes of property ownership caused by the deteriorating relations of the Jewish community with the crown, culminating in the exile in 1290.[26]

Jeffries is able to associate one pottery assemblage (thereafter PA) with a known Jewish household. Using the spatial analysis in this paper, I can link two more Jewish household to a PA. Figure 7 shows that a PA was found behind a Jewish owned house on Gresham Street, next to a house that contained a *mikveh* and a house that may have served as a synagogue. Another PA was found in a well associated with the Milk Street house containing a *mikveh* and the third in the cesspit of a house that had a mixed Jewish and Christian ownership. This analysis strengthens Jefferies' link between the pottery groups and Jewish ownership and is very valuable to our understanding of Jewish everyday life.

The likelihood that that the PAs belong to Jewish households may be strengthened by Jewish dietary law. The system of laws governing what and how Jews should eat is very complex. One of the most important laws is the one which enjoins Jews to separate milk and meat dishes.[27] Modern Jewish households usually keep two separate dining sets, one for dairy foods and the other for meat. The number of dining vessels found in a Jewish household is likely to be much larger than those found in non-Jewish households. If this practice was also followed in medieval England it would help to explain the unusually large size of Jefferies' pottery groups.

Jefferies notes that wine jugs provide a "major signature and are present in large quantities" in the PAs. Please see an example of the type of jugs identified in Figure 6. He rightly observes that these jugs are indicative of large-scale entertaining.[28] Families who live in expensive stone houses, have strong royal connections and in at least one case can afford to build a *mikveh* for their own personal use are probably important members of the community. Entertaining friends, family and business associates, especially around the numerous Jewish holidays is highly likely. Even if not linked to a Jewish household, large numbers of pottery used for entertaining is likely in this wealthy area. Yet the location and numbers of pottery are strongly supportive of Jewish association.

Pepper and Jeffries' work helps to fill out the lack of clearly identifiable Jewish objects. The very deficiency is significant. It can be explained by the short term of Jewish residency, the exile and the state of the archaeology in London. An additional possibility is that Jewish everyday life was very similar to their Christian neighbours. Despite the links made between the pottery, lead tokens, scales and counters, none of these objects had Jewish identification. While it is possible that those were sold or destroyed after the exile, it is also possible that London Jews did not try very hard to differentiate their portable objects from those of others. This indicates the community was less differentiated and isolated than is usually postulated. On the one hand these objects do confirm the life of Jews as outlined by historical documents, that of wealthy bankers and merchants. On the other hand, there is nothing in the objects they used every day that distinguishes them from their Christian neighbours (with the possible exception of pottery quantities). Having examined as much as we can from the evidence of how Jews and Christians in the area lived, an examination of burial costumes may shed more light on the differences and similarities of the two communities.

Figure 6: Example of the type of jugs found in the pottery assemblages identified by Jeffries; KING fabric code; Height 330 mm.
By permission Museum of London. Catalogue number A200 (no context number available).

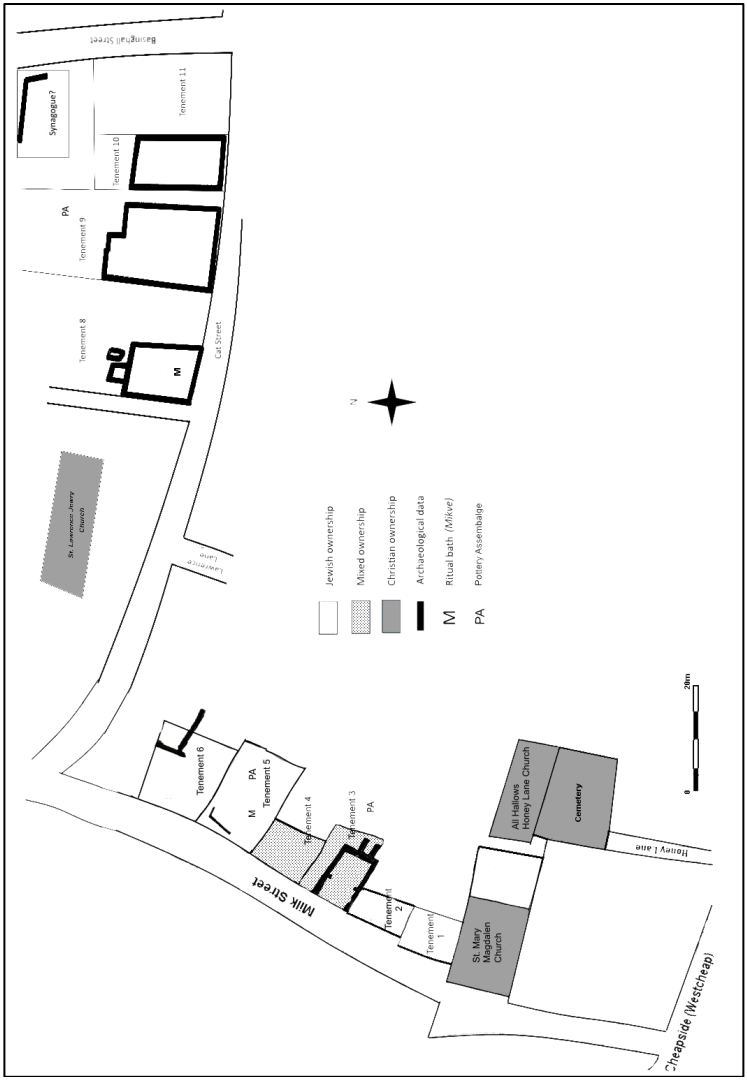

Figure 7: Locations of pottery assemblages in the study area

Burials

We are very fortunate in having any archaeological data about Jewish burials in London. This has only been possible due to the excavation

of the Jewish Cemetery at Cripplegate by William Grimes in 1961. The site was identified by Marjorie Honeybourne using an extensive documentary survey.[29] The cemetery site was outside the city wall, (see figure 5) The earliest reference to the site in historical records appears to be in 1218, according to Honeybourne. Records appear to indicate continuous use of the cemetery by the Jewish community until 1291, a year after the Expulsion, when Edward I granted the site to William de Montfort.[30] No chronological dating evidence is available from the excavation. Grimes proceeded to excavate available parts of the site, since bomb rubble covered the area. The general impression received from the limited publication of the excavation, is of disappointment.

In Grimes' words:

> ...It was found everywhere that the cellar floors rested immediately upon undisturbed natural brickearth or gravel. The upper parts of which had already been removed. In the northern part of the site, around Jewin Street, the effect of this was to destroy all traces of graves or of any structure earlier than the eighteenth century. In the narrower strip on the south side, between Well Street and St. Giles churchyard, the results were more rewarding. Here was found a series of seven graves in all. They were closely set, in an irregular line, oriented east-west and rather larger than most graves[31]...

Grimes goes on to say that he was very surprised to find no human remains in the graves at all, and that they were emptied at some point and refilled with what he called: 'garden soil'. An additional, less well-defined group of graves were found nearby, and appeared to share the same east west orientation, and the lack of any clear human remains. Grimes attributes this removal to Jews at the time of the expulsion, or Christians. Yet Jews were unlikely to disturb any Jewish human remains, considering it a desecration.[32] So, the more likely culprits are Christians. Interestingly, Grimes comments on the fact that in one of the graves the skeleton of a small dog was found, but he does not assign it a date and while it could be an attempt to desecrate the site by non-Jews, it could also be naturally occurring, considering the cemetery site was later used as a garden.

As noted above, the Cripplegate cemetery excavation was poorly published. Honeybourne's article on the documentary sources and the history of the site is extensive, but the archaeology is only very briefly mentioned by both Honeybourne and Grimes, in his page and a half's account of the excavation in his book on Roman and Medieval London. Attempts to recover plans and field notes in the Archaeological Archive and the archive of the Jewish Historical Society of England (the sponsor of the excavation) garnered limited success. No real site plans and field notes survived, though copious correspondence regarding the excavation did. I have been able, however, to piece together the following sources: Honeybourne's article, a pre-excavation site plan and a small sketch of the burials found in the Archaeological Archive at MOLA, as well as Grime's limited description. The combination of these sources allowed me to construct the overall plan shown in Figure 5. The exact location of the graves is an estimation. One of the archive photographs has been reproduced as figure 8. No gravestones were found, although Jewish gravestones have been found in secondary use in London.

Figure 8: Cripplegate Cemetery Burials, © Museum of London

Christian medieval burials in London are more numerous and less problematic than Jewish ones. For the purposes of this study, I have chosen to concentrate on the burials found in St. Lawrence Jewry, since it represents the closest burials found to the Cripplegate cemetery and it is located within the mixed Jewish Christian residential area I explored in the spatial analysis above. The St. Lawrence Jewry burials begin in the eleventh century. Yet since the Cripplegate cemetery is dated by historical records to the 13th century, I will focus the study on the St Lawrence Jewry burials dated to the 13th century.

In the thirteenth century, the churchyard of St. Lawrence Jewry saw an intensive burial phase. Many of the 13th century graves disturbed the earlier twelfth century ones. 18 people were interred in this phase of the churchyard burials (see Figure 9). The burials were all single and oriented west-east, with the head to the west. They had a wide variety of traits, and included biers, coffins and planks. Tree ring dates suggest they took place between 1200 and 1250. No gravestones are noted in the publication.[33]

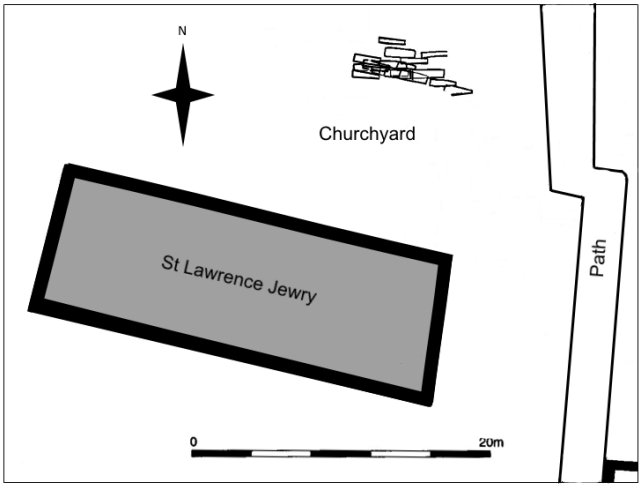

Figure 9: St. Lawrence Jewry Burials, based on fig. 103, pp. 106-7 in the London Guildhall

The data available does not allow us to compare the size of the burials. Grimes notes that the Cripplegate burials were 'rather larger

than most graves' but since no actual measurements are associated with this assessment and the plans and photographs lack a scale, it is impossible to compare the size of the burials in the Cripplegate Cemetery with the St. Lawrence Churchyard burials. Even if we may rely on Grime's assessment of the size, since the burials were emptied and then refilled, it is hard to trust that the dimensions of the burials excavated by Grimes are the same as the dimensions of the original burials. Similarly, we cannot compare the number of skeletons, their sexes and ages and any burial traits, as these were not found in the Cripplegate cemetery.

It is, however, possible to discuss several interesting features of both burial sites. Discussion of burial location, orientation, shape and intercutting can be used to understand the degree of shared custom and influence or separateness of the two communities. The location of the two burial sites, although close in proximity, is also very distinct from one another. Cripplegate cemetery lies just beyond the city wall and ditch, and could be easily accessed through Cripplegate. The cemetery formed a distinct burial site and was surrounded by secular houses and gardens, (see Figure 5) but did not appear to include any religious houses, although historical descriptions include a cemetery building (described as a dovecote by later authors) and water streams used for the purification of the dead in Jewish burial rituals (later described as a pond).[34] Jewish cemeteries are usually located away from population centres. In fact, the three other Jewish medieval cemeteries, in Oxford, Winchester and Northampton, were all located outside the city walls.[35] The reason appears to be rooted in Jewish purity laws since a cemetery is considered to be impure and not fit for people to live nearby. *Cohanim* (the decedents of Israelite priests), for example, may not enter a cemetery. This may be rooted in the practical considerations that prompted Jewish sources to recommend surrounding the cemetery or the burials themselves with protections against anything that may harm the dead.[36] Since those will include animals, it may be easier to understand why custom dictated that it is safer for the living to stay away from the dead and keep cemeteries away from population centres.

By contrast, the St. Lawrence Jewry churchyard burials are located inside the city walls, and lie in close proximity to St Lawrence church (see Figure 9). A Jewish synagogue may have stood at the other end of

the block, in Basinghall Street (see Figure 4). Not all Christian burials took place in Churchyards in Medieval England, burials also took place in hospital grounds as well as cemeteries. However, all these locations were within population centres and not outside the settlement walls, as in the Jewish case. Christian burials took place near churches, as in the St. Lawrence Jewry case, because the church consecrated the burial.[37] The location of Jewish and Christian burials in London and indeed elsewhere does show a considerable divergence in practice between the two communities. However, burial is an undeniably religious rite, so it is unclear to what extent the burial location would have indicated or created an estrangement between the two communities.

Interestingly the orientation of the burials was the same in both the Cripplegate Cemetery and in the St. Lawrence churchyard. The burials in the two sites were oriented in the same direction, west-east. With no actual remains found in the Cripplegate cemetery, we have no idea where the head lie, so the orientation could also be east-west. The St Lawrence churchyard burials were oriented west-east with the head in the western part of the grave. Burial orientation in Jewish and Christian tradition follows different traditions. Jewish graves have been argued to be traditionally aligned west-east, facing Jerusalem.[38] This tradition has not been consistently followed, even in the Holy Land, however. My research into burial orientation in Byzantine Palestina found no correlation between the alignment of the burial and any religious indicators. The east-west burial position was not found to be statistically significant.[39] Similarly, no real orientation rule exists for Christian burials either. Hadley states that near churches, as in our case, the burials followed the alignment of the church,[40] but that generally, the alignment and positioning of the bodies varied from case to case.