

Jerzy Mazur

## JEWISH SEALS IN LATE MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN POLAND

Sphragistics (also known as sigillography) is one of history's auxiliary sciences and investigates the historical meaning of seals and signet rings attached to or impressed upon documents. It is generally accepted by historians that seals constitute an important primary source for an investigation of the legal, social and economic position of the Jews. This article attempts to undertake the problem of the use of seals by the Jews in medieval and early modern Poland-Lithuania. It will analyze how Jews employed seals as an important legal instrument in notarizing their contracts, deeds, wills and other documents.

The present text is a response to elaboration on some of the theses expressed in the scholarly works of two eminent historians occupied with medieval European history and who were particularly interested in both Jewish and Christian sigillography. Adam Chmiel (1865–1934), who was a professor at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, published in the years 1899–1903 a series of articles devoted to the history of Jewish seals in *Wiadomości Numizmatyczno-Archeologiczne (Numismatic and Archeological Reports)*.<sup>1</sup> There, he presented his newly discovered Jewish seals and signet rings. Chmiel estimated that all of the artifacts enlisted in his articles were produced and used in early modern Poland (between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries).

As the oldest example of the use of seal by a Jew, Chmiel described a signet ring owned by Bohadamer Raszczicz, the “son of the Jew from Ostra.” Bohadamer's seal was mentioned in a document issued by him in Kraków in 1524. The seal itself was not preserved, but Chmiel testified to the existence of the ribbon to which the seal was originally attached. Raszczicz's document was a confirmation of the loan of 133 Polish *złoty* given to Just Dłacz, a deputy to the Kraków's city council.<sup>2</sup>

Adam Chmiel's articles were primarily concentrated on the Jewish sigillography and, as such, are unique in Polish historical literature. He subsequently established that the seal of Bohadamer Raszczicz from 1524 was the earliest example of a Jewish seal used for notarizing a civil action. Thus, one could conclude that Polish Jews did not possess or use personal seals before the middle of the sixteenth century.

Daniel M. Friedenberg, a well-known scholar of the auxiliary sciences of Jewish history, accepted such a conclusion. In 1987, he published a monumental monograph devoted to the medieval Jewish sigillography (sphragistics) in Europe and the Ottoman Empire. Friedenberg discovered, in cooperation with a number of American, European and Israeli medievalists and archivists, an impressive collection of Jewish seals. This large treasury of primary sources – both iconographic and documentary – enabled him

---

<sup>1</sup> Chmiel 1899/1902, 61–70, 113–116, 390–392; Chmiel 1903, 160–164.

<sup>2</sup> Chmiel 1899/1902, 392.

to analyze systematically the phenomenon of Jewish seals in medieval Ashkenazi and Sephardi practice. Friedenbergs book takes the form of an extended catalogue containing 177 entries from France, England, Spain, Italy and the Holy Roman Empire of German Nation. The author attached, when possible, the photographs of documents and seals, which he identified as Jewish.

Friedenberg also investigated the use of Jewish seals in Central and Eastern Europe. While presenting a few examples of the Jewish seals from Central Europe, primarily from the territories of Hungary and Czech Crown, Friedenbergs underlined that any definite conclusions regarding Central European Jewish history were questionable because of largely insufficient archival research and underdeveloped local Jewish studies.

In one of the annexes from his book, Friedenbergs discusses the scholarship and theories of Adam Chmiel. Friedenbergs questioned Chmiels identification of Bohadamer's Raszczyk seal as an example of the Jewish seal. The American historian paid attention to the very important detail included in the text of the document from 1524.<sup>3</sup> He noticed that in the aforementioned court record, Bohadamer was literally described by a municipal scribe as the "son of the Jew from Ostra" (*son der Jude von der Ostra*). According to Friedenbergs, this formulation puts in question the Jewishness of Bohadamer. In the late medieval and early modern Europe, Jews usually appeared in official sources with the Latin or German prefix: *Iudeus* or *der Jude*. According to Friedenbergs, Bohadamer's depiction as the "son of the Jew" should be understood as a suggestion that he was most likely a Jewish convert to Christianity. Furthermore, this hypothesis was strengthened by Raszczyks first name – Bohadamer – which etymology suggests rather German – Christian roots.

Friedenberg's conclusion that Bohadamer Raszczyk was not Jewish at the time of using his seal is very important for the main subject of this text – the earliest history of Jewish seals in Poland. Is Friedenbergs assumption indeed correct? I will try to show that his explanation is only one of the few possible solutions and arguably not the most probable one. Friedenbergs thesis on the Bohadamer's Raszczyk conversion is quite disputable from the perspective of our knowledge of medieval legal forms. The description of Bohadamer as the "son of the Jew from Ostra" should not be understood as an obvious and a conclusive proof for his conversion to Christianity. When a medieval Jew converted into Christianity he was given another, very standardized cognomen by judicial authorities: *Iudeus conversus*, *Iudeus baptisatus* in Latin, *przechrzta* in Polish or *getafte Iude* in German. Nevertheless, the question remains: who was Bohadamer Raszczyk? I would argue, contrary to Friedenbergs, that Bohadamer Raszczyk was Jewish. The letter of deeds from 1524 was written in Kraków, and the most important information for a local municipal scribe was Bohadamer's provenance. Most likely this document was prepared according to the information orally provided by Bohadamer himself. It is very plausible to assume that Bohadamer speaking, either Yiddish or in the vernacular used a traditional Jewish formula: Bohadamer, son of the Jew (name of his father) from Ostra. He provided his name, the name of his father and place of birth (or permanent residency). Such an oral

---

<sup>3</sup> Friedenbergs 1987, 364–365.

declaration was most likely written down by the Kraków's notary. We have sufficiently numerous examples of Jews who appeared in late medieval and early modern legal documents without being clearly identified as Jews.

Regardless of the questionable conclusions of the Friedenbergs' 'polemics' concerning Raszczicz – American historians argued that Jews in Poland-Lithuania did not use or even possess personal seals at least until the middle of the sixteenth century. The second part of this text will clearly show that these assumptions, perhaps expressed due to insufficient access to primary sources, were incorrect.

Possessing a personal seal by individuals clearly indicated their ability to carry out all legal actions, particularly those related to financial operations. Attaching seals to documents was one of the most important ways of certifying their authenticity, especially if a person performing such legal action was unable to sign it or if the signature was not sufficient. Therefore, seals, together with oath, witnesses, and later on signature, should be enlisted among the most popular means of validating documents. The use of seals by Jews was considered to be a considerable privilege in Europe during the Middle Ages, strengthening their parity with Christian burghers. This is clearly visible in the 1223 ordinances of King Luis VIII limiting the banking activity of French Jews. One of the punitive articles, aimed at hindering Jewish money-lending, was the prohibition of using seals for loan-debts.<sup>4</sup> Several decades earlier Phillip Augustus also appointed two supervisors of the Jewish seal in every large city of his kingdom.<sup>5</sup>

Before I attempt to sketch the history of Jewish seals in medieval Poland I should make the point that the Jews there were not subject to any significant limitations regarding their legal abilities to conclude valid contracts. After the eleventh century, numerous information about Jewish activities in trade and in royal and princely service can be found in Polish and Hebrew sources. It is also well known that the privilege of Boleslaus the Pious, the prince of Kalisz, issued in 1264 (and later confirmed by Kazimierz the Great) granted a wide-ranging protection to the Jews and their economic activities. They were permitted to transport merchandise, trade and lend money on interest. Thus, there is no historical justification for a possible thesis that the Jews in Poland were not able to use their personal seal because of the legal limitations imposed on them by the Polish authorities.

Seals are also discussed, although not very frequently, in Jewish legal texts. Jewish seals were used extensively in ancient Israel; however also in the early Middle Ages the exilarchs in Arab Babylonia had their own seals.<sup>6</sup> Clearly, Jewish religious authorities were suspicious of using the seals primarily because of the fear that the images engraved on them violated both biblical and Talmudic law. Such doubts were expressed (for example, by the German scholar Meir of Rothenburg (1215–1293)).<sup>7</sup> Despite those legal controversies, Jews employed seals both in validating legal deeds and especially in protecting the laws of *kashrut*. This aspect of the seals' use was

---

<sup>4</sup> Golb 1998, 418.

<sup>5</sup> Baron 1967, 329.

<sup>6</sup> Baron 1958, 132. Baron quotes a *responsum* of Natronai (in 787): 'They dispatched to all Jewish communities letters provided with the seal of the exilarch and the four seals of the authorities.'

<sup>7</sup> 'We are suspicious of idolatry only with projecting a relief seal...;' quoted after Mann 2005, 222.

discussed in detail in the Babylonian Talmud.<sup>8</sup> In 1627, the Lithuanian *Va'ad* instructed the Jewish producers of dairy products to seal the doors of the chamber if the products were stored bearing their personal seal.<sup>9</sup> Seals also had a much deeper, religious and even mystical meaning in Judaism. With the symbol of a seal, the thirteenth-century *Zohar* identified the divine affirmation of God's covenant with Israel. At the same time, the author of the *Zohar* displayed a remarkable knowledge of the legal importance of seals in medieval world. It described how seals were affixed to the document and mentioned several aspects of their legal importance.<sup>10</sup>

The earliest evidence of the use of personal seals by Polish Jews can be traced back to the document issued in 1381 by Lewko, a Jew from Kraków. Lewko was one of the most prominent Jewish bankers and financiers in medieval Kraków, and indeed in the entire Kingdom of Poland. He lived in the second part of fourteenth century and provided financial services to the municipal authorities, local noblemen, burghers, and even state dignitaries of the capital city of Kraków. Above all, Lewko was well known for his close association with the royal court of the Polish kings Kazimierz the Great (1333–1370) and Władysław Jagiełło (1385–1434), whom he assisted in their public and personal expenses. Lewko of Kraków was also an important leader of the Jewish community in Kraków, which at this time was located between St. Anne and St. Szczepan Streets.

In the document from 1381, Lewko confirmed his absolution of Kraków's city council from all debts it owed to him. This agreement was concluded between him and the municipality of Kraków represented by the city counselors: Martinus Warschow, Martinus Bem, Albert Fochsnagil, Wynand Danchk, Andrew Wierzynek, Jan Gerlach, Jan Spitzmer and Stephen of Olawa.<sup>11</sup> The text of the agreement included a solemn declaration by Lewko that:

*... famosi viri..., consules civitatis Cracouiensis, nomine suo et totius universitatis dicte civitatis, mihi ad plenum de universis et singulis mutuacionibus pecuniariis, quas eisdem umquam feci in quibuscunque summis magnis vel parvis quocunque tempore, hora vel momento et mutuavi sub quocunque pacto, condicionibus seu promissionibus quibuscunque, usuram vel non usuram concernentibus quomodolibet a primevo tempore, quo cum eisdem consulibus et eorundem quibuscunque predessoribus nomine, quo supra umquam, ut predicitur, in mutuacionibus pecuniaris agere, facere et disponere habui usque ad diem datarum presencium, integraliter et ex toto satisfecerunt pleniter persolvendo.*<sup>12</sup>

The document ends with an important statement for our subject, a corroborative formula: *In cuius rei testimonium sigillum meum presentibus est appensum*. It proves unquestionably that Lewko authenticated his document not by placing his signature but primarily by appending his personal seal.<sup>13</sup> This agreement between Lewko of Kraków,

<sup>8</sup> See for example a lengthy discussion between R. Eleazar and R. Johanan on protecting the *kashrut* of wine in: Babylonian Talmud, Seder Nezikin, Avodah Zarah 31a.

<sup>9</sup> Halperin 1945, no. 46.

<sup>10</sup> Frojmovic 2002, 77–78.

<sup>11</sup> Wyrozumska 1995, no. 89, 40.

<sup>12</sup> Wyrozumska 1995, no. 89, 39.

<sup>13</sup> Wyrozumska 1995, no. 89, 39.

the Jewish potentate and communal leader, and the city council was again confirmed on the following day, August 4, 1381. Thus, the year 1381 needs to be accepted as the first known example of the use of the Jewish seal in the Polish Kingdom.<sup>14</sup>

Another interesting instance of the Jewish seal used for commercial purposes occurred in Kraków at the end of fifteenth century. Ryfko, a Jew from Kiev (*Ryvko Iudeus de Kyov*), carried his business affairs in the capital city of the kingdom. Ryfko, according to “the law of the guest” (*ius hospitum*), tried to call back the loan that his father gave to Kraków’s citizen Nicolas Tchenskindorf. To prove his legal claims Ryfko presented a document of deeds issued by his father and authenticated by his personal seal (*sub eius sigillo*).<sup>15</sup>

However, not only Jews who lived or conducted their business in the capital city of Kraków used their seals for legal purposes. More examples of Jewish seals can be found outside of Kraków. We can see an importance of seals for financial transactions among the Jews coming from the major communities in Lwów (Leopolis, Lemberg, Lwów) and Brześć Litewski (Brest Litovsk).

One of the more influential Jewish merchants and money lenders that used a personal signet ring was Schanko from Brześć Litewski. He was very active in Warsaw between the years of 1429 and 1443. His main occupations were trade and lending small sums of money at interest. In 1429, Schanko sold a very large supply of cloth to Stanisław Rospeński from Gabin. He also sold precious spices imported from the East and other raw materials such as timber.<sup>16</sup> After 1441, Schanko endured serious financial difficulties, most likely because of his failure to meet the requirements of the contract, which he concluded a few years earlier with two merchants from Gdańsk (Danzig), Nicolas Wilkendorff and Froyn. They sued Schanko at the Warsaw municipal court and demanded the confiscation of his movable property. Schanko appeared in the court and tried to prevent the abovementioned confiscation by issuing a written promise to satisfy the plaintiffs’ claims. This document was authenticated by Schanko’s personal signet seal in April of 1442 (*zo habe ich Schanko meyn zignet mit willen unde wesende beynden an dyse brieffen gedruket*).<sup>17</sup>

One of the most unusual and interesting court cases over the Jewish use of seals can be found in *Akta Grodzkie i Ziemskie (Records of Castle and Regional Courts)*.<sup>18</sup> This dealt with an internal conflict in the Lwów Jewish community that arose in the middle of fifteenth century between two important and influential members of Ruthenian (Ukrainian) Jewry: Schachno of Lwów, who leased lucrative royal customs in the city of Lwów and major merchant Kalef from the Genoese, Italian colony of Caffa (on the Black Sea coast). A quarrel started when a lawsuit was filed by Kalef of Caffa against Schachno, in which Kalef declared that Schachno owed him a large sum of 56 scores of Prague *grosch*. As proof of his allegations, Kalef presented the court with two letters written by the *wojewoda* (Red Ruthenia province sheriff) and Schachno himself. Kalef

<sup>14</sup> Wyrozumska 1995, no. 88, 40: *In cuius rei testimonium sigillum dicte civitatis nostre Cracouiensis presentibus est appensum.*

<sup>15</sup> Wyrozumska 1995, no. 766, 168.

<sup>16</sup> Wierzbowski 1916, no. 99, 586, 588, 951.

<sup>17</sup> Wierzbowski 1916, no. 619.

<sup>18</sup> AGZ, vol. XIV.

also stressed that Schachno had attached his own seal to the aforementioned letter. Schachno disagreed and claimed that he possessed another document with Kalef's seal. The latter proved that it was *the wojewoda* who agreed to pay Schachno's debts. Kalef refuted this argument on the grounds of forgery. He claimed that the seal presented by Schachno was not his own, Kalef's seal (*sed predictus Calef abnegavit se a predicta litera et asseruit, quod non sit suum sigillum*).<sup>19</sup> Kalef's accusations of the forgery created confusion among the municipal judges. They did not feel competent to investigate this allegation and finally decided that Kalef should (...) *testes produceret, qui profiterentur et iurarent, quod sit ipsius sigillum secundum ius et modum Iudeorum, cui precepimus, ut Iudeos testes nominaret, qui eosdem nominavit, sed actor noluit aliquem Iudeum in testimonium recipere...*<sup>20</sup>

Unfortunately, we do not know anything about the results of this fascinating legal dispute. Nevertheless, it is striking that the Jewish representatives were called to provide their expertise to the Christian municipal court regarding the authenticity of the Jewish seal. This suggests that the seal had a Hebrew inscription and *therefore* Christian judges required Jewish expertise.

Schachno of Lwów experienced further serious financial problems. We learn about these from another lawsuit brought by Jan Ciolek from Wnyków to the court in Lwów in June 1443. This petty nobleman tried to recover his loan on the basis of a deeds letter that was allegedly issued by Schachno. Schachno, when ordered by the judge to certify its validity, denied the authenticity of this document, (*quod si... Schachno iudeus recognoverit alias zeszna ad sigillum littere sue obligatorie*).<sup>21</sup> He questioned both the validity of the seal and signatures on the document provided by Jan Ciolek (... *Super quo debito literam obligacionis Schachnonis produxit sub sigillo eius. Schachno derogavit littere et inscriptionis*).<sup>22</sup>

A similar situation occurred two years later (June 1445), when Schachno attempted to denounce the authenticity of a deeds letter presented to the Lwów's castle court by Pietro Messopero. Pietro was an Italian merchant from Licostomo, Genoese Italian colony located on the Black Sea coast. According to the Messopero's testimony Schachno failed to pay back a substantial debt of 157 florins (*grzywna*). During the first court hearing Schachno demanded from Pietro to present an original deeds letter validated by his, Schachno's seal (*habes super me litteram sub meo sigillo obligatoriam?*). Pietro, represented by his attorney (*procurator*) Jan of Wysokie, confirmed that he had an original deeds letter issued by Schachno (*habeo literam obligatoriam super te*). In response, Schachno questioned the authenticity of the document (*przyganil literam obligatoriam*) and petitioned the judge to refer his case to the Jewish court (*domini, peto, iudicate me secundum ius Iudeorum*).<sup>23</sup> It is very possible that Schachno questioned the validity of Pietro's letter of deeds again by claiming the forgery of seals. This would eventually allow him to be referred to the Jewish court in the Lwów castle (*sąd wojewodziński*).

<sup>19</sup> AGZ, vol. XIV, no. 140.

<sup>20</sup> AGZ, vol. XIV, no. 160.

<sup>21</sup> AGZ, vol. XIV, no. 784.

<sup>22</sup> AGZ, vol. XIV, no. 785.

<sup>23</sup> AGZ, vol. XIV, no. 1406.

Unfortunately, we do not have any Jewish seals from late medieval Poland preserved today. Perhaps it would be justified to conclude that because of the lack of sufficient archival material we cannot say anything definite about the iconography and inscriptions of these seals. Nevertheless, it is still possible that a careful archival investigation could bring new discoveries. Despite these insufficiencies, it seems reasonable to analyze a typical iconography of Jewish seals used in other parts of Central and Western Europe. Such a comparative approach may suggest possible answers to the question of iconography of the Jewish seals in medieval Poland–Lithuania. For this purpose, I will use an already mentioned, monumental catalogue of the Jewish medieval seals published by Daniel M. Friedenberg. Additionally, I will limit my analysis to the Jewish seals from those Ashkenazi lands that shared borders with the Polish Kingdom in the Middle Ages.

The Hebrew Bible, especially the Pentateuch, directly inspired the most popular graphic motifs employed by Jewish art in medieval Europe, particularly in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. “National” self-consciousness was primarily expressed in the frequent references to the twelve tribes of Israel. Certain motifs intended to symbolize the specific tribes of Israel and significant names of the heroes preserved by Jewish tradition. Thus, the tribe of Judah was represented by the whelp of a lion and the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali respectively by wool and the doe. The donkey or tent symbolized the tribe of Issachar, while the snake and eagle were seen as representations of the tribe of Dan. Joseph’s tribe was portrayed by wine or the bull. The wolf was connected to the tribe of Benjamin; a picture of pastoral staff symbolized Levi, the lion the tribe of Gad and finally Ephraim was linked to fish.<sup>24</sup> Some of these symbols (eagles, oxen, lions, cherubim) were strongly connected to the scriptural description of the Second Temple. They were also present in the symbolism of Christian seals but obviously had a distinctively different meaning and purpose.

Parallel to the influence of the Jewish symbols on Christian iconography, Christian motifs found their way into Jewish art. Among such symbols adopted by the Jewish artists were those prominent in a newly developed cult of Mary in Europe, especially in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In this time some Jewish seals were adorned with the symbols of Mary’s cult such as triple lilies and roses; however, these signs were obviously stripped of their original meaning and served only as a decorative element.<sup>25</sup>

There were also numerous graphic representations unambiguously pointing to the Jewishness of the seals’ owners. Some of them were evidently Jewish such as the so-called “Jewish Hat” (a full portrait of the Jew covered with this characteristic hat) or a new moon depicted together with a star or hexagonal Star of David.<sup>26</sup> Jewish seals also provided an opportunity to display other traditional Jewish symbols such as the menorah, shofar, olive or palm branch, grapes and the Temple’s sacrificial altar.<sup>27</sup> These were often collaged with other motifs but clearly identified the seal’s holder as a Jew.

Iconographic symbols such as those described above provide a strong indication that seal’s owner was Jewish and a Hebrew inscription only confirmed this. Sometimes

---

<sup>24</sup> Friedenberg 1987, 24.

<sup>25</sup> Friedenberg 1987, 94, no. 35; 96, no. 37.

<sup>26</sup> Friedenberg 1987, nos. 83, 183; 87, 190; 88, 192; 140, 260.

<sup>27</sup> Friedenberg 1987, 28–29.

the Hebrew language appeared alongside with Latin or the vernacular. Seals' inscriptions contained several types of information but usually included the name of the seal's owner (in many instances accompanied by his/her father's name). Daniel M. Friedenberg noted that the standard expression, describing the owner's father, included information whether or not he was still alive. If the father was a notable scholar or rabbi, it was also indicated in the inscription.<sup>28</sup>

Even though there are no preserved Jewish seals from the medieval Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, we can still attempt to reconstruct them by analyzing available artifacts from neighboring countries and provinces, especially those from Silesia and Hungary. One of the most interesting Jewish seals from this region is a golden signet ring found by Marcus Brann in Wroclaw in 1906.<sup>29</sup> This thirteenth-century reversible artifact belonged, according to the Hebrew inscription, to Abba ben Abba. Its edge was decorated with an image of a dragon and its rim with a head of an unrecognizable mythological animal. The face of the seal was adorned with a representation of unidentified bird with its head turned to the right and surrounded by small branches of a tree. The signet's reverse side showed an abbreviated Hebrew inscription deciphered by Marcus Brann as, "Increase my luck (happiness), do not diminish it. Amen, Amen. Amen. Selah. And nothing is here of the Amorites practice." The formula distancing the owner of the seal from "Amorites' practices" was employed to confirm that the inscription and ring itself were not connected with magic.<sup>30</sup>

Much less impressive are the preserved seals of Hungarian Jews: Mendel, the royal servant active in Hungary in the second part of the fifteenth century and his son Jacob. Their seals include the portrait of a Jew with a covered head and a lion on the rectangular shield, above which is located a Hebrew anagram composed of the letters *yod* and *mem* – the first letters of Jacob's Mendel name.<sup>31</sup>

More comparative material from the early modern period can also be found in the Polish-Lithuanian lands. Despite its late provenance, it is crucial for understanding the Jewish seals in Poland. Polish scholars A. Chmiel and Zofia Kozłowska-Budkowa published several of such findings. Especially interesting are the seals from the first part of the sixteenth century, which belonged to three Ruthenian (Ukrainian) Jews: Moses Rabiejowicz, Wolczko ben Judah (both from Międzybóž) and Thowydzar from Szarawka. While Moses' seal (1539) was composed merely of an anagram of his name,<sup>32</sup> the seals of Wolczko (1543) and Thowydzar (1544) include more substantial iconographic material. An inscription engraved on Wolczko's seal contained his and his father's name and additional information on his Levite status. The Heraldic shield crowned with the crescent oriented towards the Star of David was placed beneath this inscription. A similar motif of the hexagonal star can be found on the seal of Thowydzar beneath his name.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Friedenberg 1987, 29–31.

<sup>29</sup> Brann 1907, 63–65; Friedenberg 1987, 191, no. 148.

<sup>30</sup> Brann 1907, 64–65; Friedenberg 1987, 192, no. 148.

<sup>31</sup> Friedenberg 1987, no. 165, 166, 167, 168, 327–328.

<sup>32</sup> Chmiel 1899/1902, 62.

<sup>33</sup> Chmiel 1899/1902, 66.



Jews also used personal seals in the late medieval and early modern period in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Already in 1489, the Jew Shavul Argonovicz accused another Jew Schan Eskovich of breaking the seal on the chest containing his valuables. The chest was deposited with Schan, and Shavul testified in royal court that some of its contents had disappeared. After the investigation, which was conducted by royal commissars, it was discovered that the seal was broken and the judge ordered Shavul to pay 50 threescore of *grosz* to Schan.<sup>34</sup> The case between Shavul and Schan is important in understanding further the history of Jewish sigillography. It proves that Jews used their seals not only to corroborate legal documents but also for various purposes such as securing their valuables. Despite such uncharacteristic applications of Jewish seals, these were still accepted as legally valid evidence by Christian courts.

Jewish seals are also mentioned in contracts for cinder delivery between Prince Fedor Sanguszko of Włodawa and Jewish merchants. In 1536, a Jew Illia Gyertsevich and his servant provided Prince Fedor Sanguszko with a financial guarantee on behalf of Moses of Lublin and Hayyim of Łuck. Illia assured the prince that they would pay for a large quantity of cinder (200 *łaszt*). He further issued a letter of guarantee with his signature in Hebrew and two personal seals. The first of the seals displayed the Star of David (*Magen David*), while the second had an unusual in Jewish iconography symbol of an anchor.<sup>35</sup> Moses of Lublin and Hayyim of Łuck also used their personal seals in the contract for cinder delivery with Prince Sanguszko.<sup>36</sup> A few years later, in 1539, the prince agreed to produce 100 *łaszt* of cinder in his forests of Włodawa and sell it to a Jew Ramail Moszkowicz of Bielsko. Both parties validated the contract with their seals; unfortunately, Ramail's seal was not legible.<sup>37</sup> Similarly illegible was the seal used by a Jew from Włodzimierz, Aaron Hawasowicz that was impressed on a legal document in the 1530s.<sup>38</sup> Isaac Doktorowicz of Beresteczko, a servant of a Jewish merchant Rubin Doktorowicz of Brześć (Lithuanian) also used his personal seal with the Star of David to validate his testimony in 1546. He recognized that Jenko Fedorowicz, the deputy *starost* from Włodzimierz delivered the cinder according the previous agreements between Rubin and Prince Fedor Sanguszko.<sup>39</sup>

Adam Chmiel, the Polish historian already mentioned in this text, published several important findings on Jewish seals from early modern Kraków. In 1550, Jol (Yol) of Kraków, son of David, impressed his seal on a debt letter. This seal contained a heraldic shield with rather a mysterious graphic (geometric) image on it. Chmiel identified it as an hourglass and compared it to a similar symbol that he had found on the sixteenth-century wine glass, the so-called *kidesh kos*.<sup>40</sup>

More complicated iconography was displayed on the golden signet ring of an anonymous Jew from Homel. We know about the provenance of this artifact from a fragmentary inscription (surrounded by the four-leaf stars), which preserved the name

---

<sup>34</sup> *Lithuanian Metrica. Book of Inscriptions (1479–1491)*, Vilnius 2004, 137.

<sup>35</sup> Gorczak 1890, 56, no. LII.

<sup>36</sup> Gorczak 1890, 57, no. LIII.

<sup>37</sup> Gorczak 1890, 214–215, no. CLXVI.

<sup>38</sup> Gorczak 1890, 562, no. CDXXIX.

<sup>39</sup> Gorczak 1890, 452–453, no. CCCLIX.

<sup>40</sup> Chmiel 1899/1902, 160–161.

of this Ruthenian town. It further included an image of a watering can placed on the heraldic shield – an ancient symbol of Levi's tribe. Arabic numerals, which together made the date of 1556, were engraved on the left and right sides of the badge.<sup>41</sup> Similar signet rings must have been widely used by Jews since we can find them even in the possession of Christians. Such rings were enlisted among the items that belonged to the municipal treasury of Kraków (1679).<sup>42</sup>

The watering can, a symbol of the Levitic tribe, also appeared much later on other seventeenth-century Jewish seals such as Aaron Levi's seal (1654). The seals of *kohanim* (Jews of priestly lineage) were decorated with ancient symbols of the blessed hands (seal of Isaac Cohen, 1654), while the sacrificial basket was adorned with a crown (a seal of Marek Szydłowski – 1660). At the same time, we still find seals without any images and accompanied only by an inscription with the name of their owners (seals of Jekusiel, son of Zalman, 1654 and of Marek Wloch, Jew from Kazimierz near Kraków, 1623).<sup>43</sup>

Much richer iconography characterized the late eighteen-century seals. These were decorated with the images of palm trees, ritual symbols, lions, etc. Such fine and complicated images were engraved on the triangular seal of Abraham Zwi and his family (son Jacob and daughter Esther Beile).<sup>44</sup> Moreover, eighteenth-century Jewish seals often contained halachically-prohibited images of a man (a young man with a bow hunting for unidentifiable bird) were engraved on a beautiful reversible seal of Salomon, son of Joachim.<sup>45</sup>

Another seal of the Węgrów *kehilla* belonged to the category of very rare Jewish communal seals. It was used in 1797 but did not contain any iconographic images.<sup>46</sup>

We can get some idea of how the Jewish seal stamp looked like from an article published by Zofia Kozłowska-Budkowa in 1950. Here, she found an interesting and unique example of the silver Jewish stamp of Pynchas son of Shulom (perhaps from the second part of sixteenth century) with a Hebrew inscription and an image of a deer (or ox), a symbol of Joseph's or Naphtali's tribe. Interestingly, the handle of the seal served as a box for cosmetic accessories.<sup>47</sup>

This article attempts to investigate the use of Jewish seals and signet rings in the medieval and subsequently early modern Poland. Jews needed and used such seals to corroborate and authenticate important commercial and credit operations or contracts. It is also proof of their strong legal standing in the economic life of late medieval and early modern Poland.

Jews used their seals for concluding legal activities among themselves, with non-Jews (as in the case of Schachno of Lwów and Kaleff of Caffa) and more importantly in the public sphere of life (as it was in case of Lewko, who corroborated a document issued together with the municipal authorities of Kraków). A Jewish seal appended to

<sup>41</sup> Chmiel 1899/1902, 390–392.

<sup>42</sup> Muczowski 1906, 49.

<sup>43</sup> Chmiel 1899/1902, 62–67.

<sup>44</sup> Chmiel 1899/1902, 114–116.

<sup>45</sup> Chmiel 1903, 162–163.

<sup>46</sup> Chmiel 1903, 164.

<sup>47</sup> Kozłowska-Budkowa 1950, 491.

a document constituted equally important legal proof of its validity for Jewish and Christian courts as the signatures and witnesses.

As already underlined, we do not have any examples of medieval Jewish seals preserved from Poland. Nevertheless, it should be assumed that they were similar in their iconography to the contemporary seals produced in the Ashkenazi world. Jewish seals contained Hebrew-language inscriptions and sometimes images indicating the Jewishness of their owners.

This article is only a small contribution to our knowledge of the history of Jewish seals in medieval and early modern Poland. It is possible that further archival research as well as an analysis of available secondary sources will shed more light on this important aspect of Jewish material and legal culture.

## ABBREVIATIONS

AGZ–O. Pietruszki, X. Liske (eds.), *Akta Grodzkie i Ziemskie z czasów Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej z archiwum t. z. w. bernardyńskiego we Lwowie*, vol. XIV, Lwów 1889.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baron, S.W. (1967): *Social and Religious History of the Jews*, vol. XI, New York.
- Baron, S.W. (1958): *Social and Religious History of the Jews*, vol. VI, New York.
- Brann, M. (1907): Ein Mittelalterlicher Siegelring mit Hebraischen Inschriften, *Schlesien Vorzeit in Bild und Schrift* 4: 63–65.
- Chmiel, A. (1899/1902): Pieczęcie żydowskie [Jewish Seals], *Wiadomości Numizmatyczno-Archeologiczne* 4: 61–70, 113–116, 390–392.
- Chmiel, A. (1903): Pieczęcie żydowskie, *Wiadomości Numizmatyczno-Archeologiczne* 5: 160–164.
- Friedenberg, D.M. (1987): *Medieval Jewish Seals from Europe*, Detroit.
- Frojmovic, E. (2002): *Imagining the Self, Imagining the Other: Visual Representation and Jewish-Christian Dynamics in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period*, New York.
- Halperin, I. (1945): *Pinkas Vaad Arbaa Aratzot*, Jerusalem.
- Golb, N. (1998): *Jews in Medieval Normandy*, Cambridge.
- Gorczałak, B. (ed.) (1890): *Archiwum Książąt Sanguszków w Sławucie*, vol. IV: 1535–1547, Lwów.
- Kozłowska-Budkowa, Z. (1950): Miscellanea sfragistyczne, *Sprawozdanie Polskiej Akademii Umiejętności*, vol. LI, no. 8: 491.
- Mann, B. (2005): Spirituality and Jewish ceremonial law, in: A. Minz & L. Schiffman (eds.), *Jewish Spirituality and Divine Law*, Jersey City, NJ: 213–234.
- Muczkowski, J. (1906): Dawny Krakowski ratusz [*Old City Hall in Kraków*], *Rocznik Krakowski* 8: 51–68.
- Wierzbowski, T. (ed.) (1916): *Księgi ławnicze starej Warszawy z XV wieku*, vol. I: *Księga nr 525 z lat 1427–1453* [Warsaw City Council Books from 15th Century: Book no. 525 from 1427–1453], Warszawa.
- Wyrozumska, B. (ed.) (1995): *Żydzi w średniowiecznym Krakowie. Wypisy źródłowe z ksiąg miejskich krakowskich* [The Jews in Medieval Kraków: Selected Records from Cracow Municipal Books], Kraków.